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THE NEW REPUBLIC

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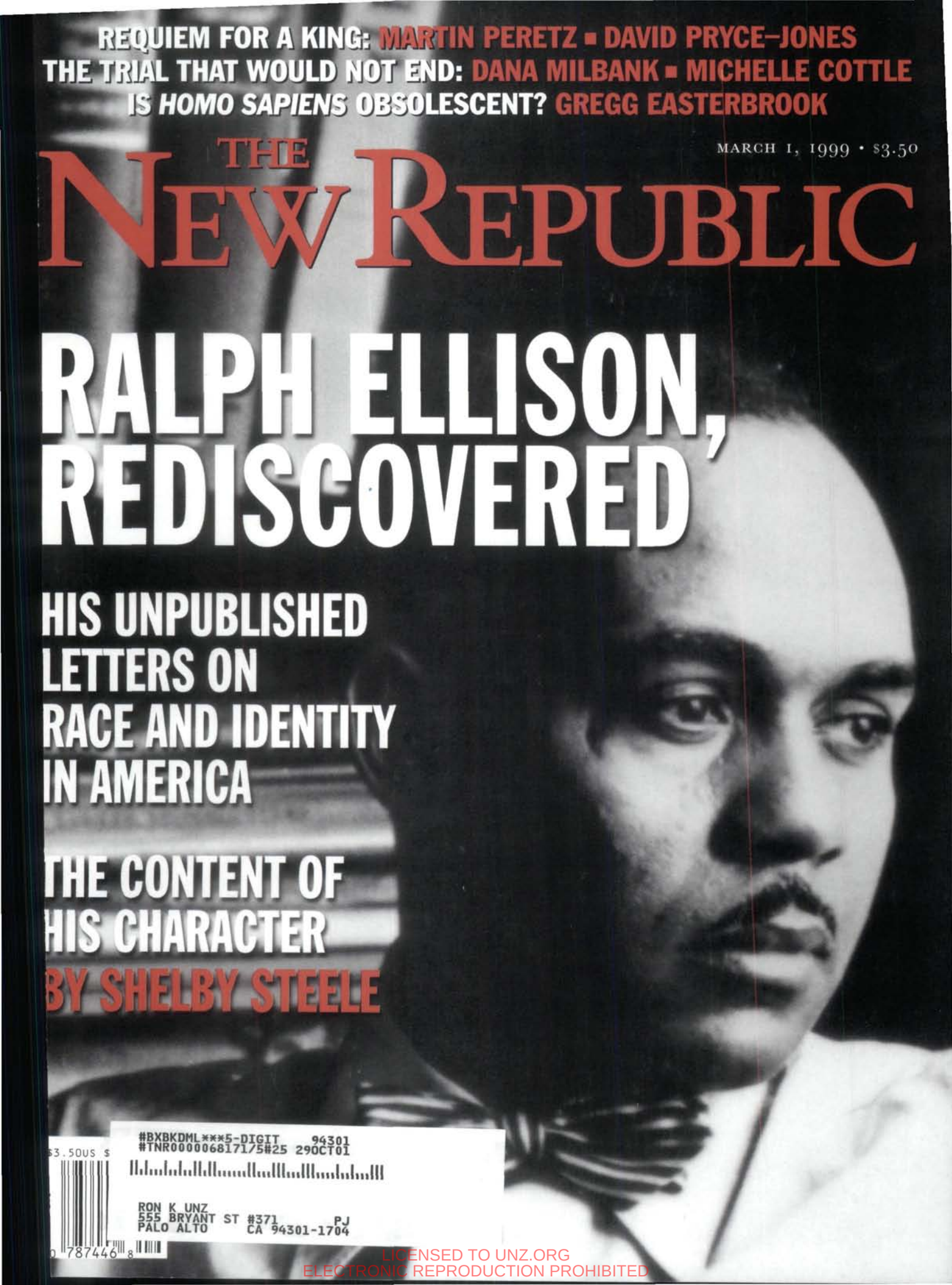
HIS UNPUBLISHED LETTERS ON RACE AND IDENTITY IN AMERICA

THE CONTENT OF HIS CHARACTER

BY SHELBY STEELE



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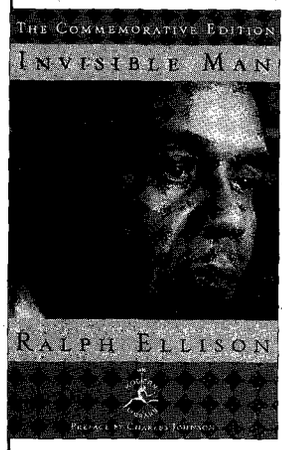
AMERICAN MASTER



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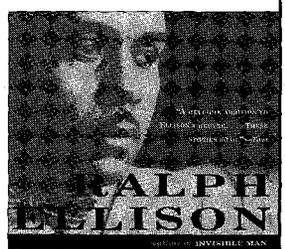

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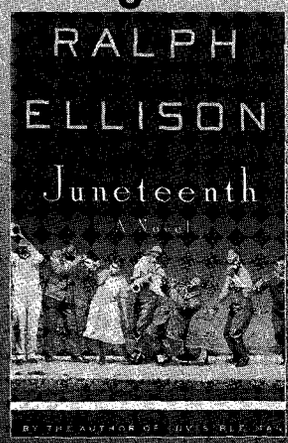

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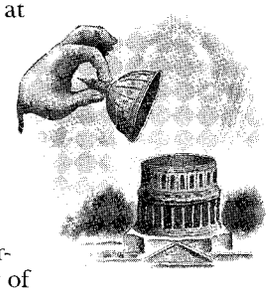
FROM WASHINGTON

Cover girl

By all accounts, Chelsea Clinton is a lovely 19-year-old young woman, the kind of daughter any couple would be proud to call their own. She "has her mother's strength," says family friend Nancy Snyderman. She was "poised and calm" at the height of the Lewinsky scandal, says diplomat-at-large Richard Holbrooke. She has an "inner glow," says the Reverend Don Jones, Hillary Clinton's childhood pastor from Illinois. She wants to grow up to be a pediatric cardiologist—literally, a healer of children's hearts. Gosh, when the first family went to Israel, she even knew more about the sights in the Holy Land than the tour guide did.



We know all of this thanks to *People* magazine, which published a cover story on the "grace under fire" of Chelsea and her mother in its February 15 issue. But the president and the first lady are not amused. Accusing *People* of rebuffing their "personal appeals" based on Chelsea's privacy and security, the White House has announced the first couple's deep "regret" that the magazine published its story anyway. (Guess all those friends who thought they were doing the first lady and, hence, themselves a favor by supplying heart-warming quotes about Chelsea should think again.) *People* managing editor Carol Wallace responded that Chelsea is a "young adult" now and that "because she is an eyewitness to the family drama and historical events unfolding around her, she is a valid journalistic subject."

It's possible that the White House's reaction to the *People* story is insincere, motivated more by the story's implication that Chelsea's "deep bond of love" with her mother might mean she harbors some sort of cooler feeling toward her father these days. And it could well be that the first lady saw the *People* story as an opportunity to further vilify—and, thus, cow—the obstreperous media at a time when the tide of public opinion seems to be running strongly in a pro-Clinton, anti-press direction.

But for now, at least, let's take the White House statement at face value. I think it was my illustrious predecessor at TNR, Michael Kinsley, who first noted (apropos Ted Kennedy) the double standard that politicians seek to enforce about coverage of their private lives. Our elected officials are only too happy to have the press cover their families, as long as the coverage focuses on their happy marriages, accomplished children, and personal relationships with God. Anything else is an invasion of privacy. One of the few politicians to try a different approach was Gary Hart in 1987, who began his presidential campaign by telling the press that his wife, Lee, was one of his closest friends and advisers, and then followed that up by challenging reporters to "put a tail on me" if they were interested in checking out the rumors that he had been cheating on her. We all know what happened to him.

The shifting standards of what constitutes proper inquiry have not been kind to Bill Clinton, either. But one thing most people have given the Clintons credit for is that they have shielded Chelsea, who was only twelve when her dad took office, rebuffing even sympathetic requests for TV interviews. (As a test of how diligent they've been, ask yourself this question: What does Chelsea Clinton's voice sound like?) In this sense, you could argue that the Clintons' complaints against *People* represent a rare outburst of consistency by the first couple. They've steadfastly refused to exploit Chelsea, and so they have a right to gripe when some grocery-store magazine splashes her on the cover, even if it's a gushing puff piece.

Except that the Clintons haven't really refrained from exploiting Chelsea. Even if they haven't actually turned her into a spokeskid for her father's campaigns or policies, they have definitely exploited the fact of her existence. The political purpose has always been obvious: to defuse Bill Clinton's image as a philanderer (and, to some extent, to humanize the chilly persona of Hillary Rodham, Esq., too). The exploitation began at the 1992 convention, when Clinton used his acceptance speech to recall his joy at seeing cute little newborn Chelsea and "hold[ing]

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

A Weekly Journal of Opinion

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Kulturkampfs

To the editors:

In "Washington Possessed" (January 25), John B. Judis asks the question, "Did [President Clinton] violate U.S. law or the Ten Commandments?" Unless the laws have been changed and I don't know about it, U.S. law forbids lying under oath. So the answer to the question is, yes, Clinton violated the law.

ANDREA KIEFFER
Roanoke, Virginia

To the editors:

I was disappointed with John B. Judis's myopic critique and would ask him to consider the following: members of the Salem community were accused of exercising demonic powers that they did not possess, and Senator McCarthy alleged subversive activity in quarters where it did not exist. Bill Clinton, on the other hand, was accused of having an affair with an intern and of lying about it under oath, and admitted to the former after months of stonewalling while a clear majority of an otherwise supportive public and many of his own congressional allies consider him guilty of the latter as well.

Just because certain voices on the right have needlessly chosen to add a coating of cultural warfare to the Lewinsky scandal does not entitle liberals to blind themselves to the underlying core of real issues of law and principle.

RONALD MACKINNON
Yarmouth, Maine

To the editors:

John B. Judis blames the Republican Party for sexual witch-hunts, but it is the fundamentalist left of the '80s and early '90s that insisted such details be made a relevant part of the public debate. From the wild-eyed quest for Robert Bork's video rentals in search of X-rated films to the inquisition of Clarence Thomas and the jihad against Senator Robert Packwood, the cultural fundamentalists of the left set the standard, and the bonfire built to burn Republicans and a conservative black man is now consuming its architects.

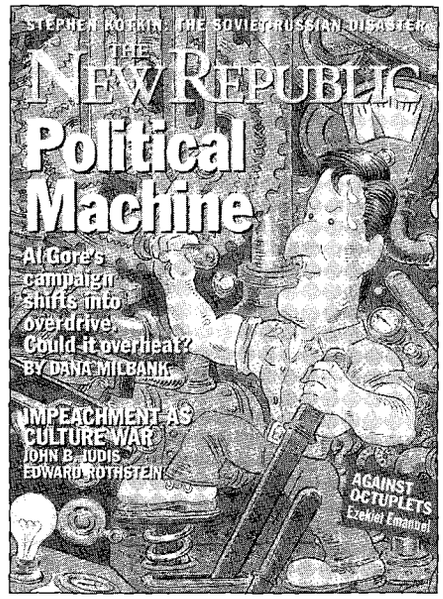
JEFFREY LORD
Washington, D.C.

Europhobia

To the editors:

Your editorial about the euro and its prospects gives off a distinct whiff of denial ("Continental Divide," January 25). You argue that the euro just papers over a phony political union, its economics will be too politically volatile to last, and it represents just another French contrivance—all in all, a fiasco in the making.

But the euro is extremely well-planned, and governments have lined up—and continue to line up—to join it, austerity or no. The euro represents the gross output of more than 300 million workers and consumers, as well as the world's largest exporter, the European Union. In five years, the euro could easily be the world's top currency, and, with the addition of a few new members, the euro zone could push past the United States and boast an economy of $8 trillion to $9 trillion, making Europe the world's number one economy.



DAVID WINCH
Ferney-Voltaire, France

Fidel fealty

To the editors:

Charles Lane makes a good suggestion in "Play Ball?" (January 25): "Perhaps we should make a standing offer to Fidel Castro: We'll lift the embargo, provide massive aid to rebuild the island, and give back the U.S. base at Guantanamo if he'll simply hold a free, multiparty, internationally monitored national election, just like the ones they have in every other Latin American country."

It would be nice, however, if Lane had found the space to explain why many other Latin American countries—Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic—have gone for short or long periods with no such elections without being subjected to embargo, invasion, assassination attempts, or diplomatic isolation by the United States. In fact, each of these countries, during its epoch of right-wing repression, received economic and military aid, diplomatic recognition, and police training from the United States. And, since these countries did not have the Soviet Union to turn to for support, American pressure might actually have accomplished something other than—as in Cuba—the devastation of a small, weak country.

GEORGE SCIALABBA
Cambridge, Massachusetts

In good faith

To the editors:

"Impeach Johnson!" by Joshua Zeitz demands a response (January 18). Andrew Johnson, the only senator from the seceded states to remain in Congress, was convinced that the Constitution did not allow secession. Later serving as war governor of Tennessee, Johnson was so zealous for the Union that many former political friends denounced him as a traitor to his state. But, with the war over and Johnson's unexpected accession to the presidency, he appeared to change course. In fact, he remained firmly committed to the view of the Constitution he had always espoused and sought to return the conquered states to their normal constitutional status.

Johnson properly vetoed acts that placed civilians in the hands of military courts in times of peace and denied habeas corpus. As to the proximate cause for his impeachment, Johnson deliberately sought to test a law he regarded as patently unconstitutional—the Supreme Court later agreed—by dismissing Edwin Stanton from his Cabinet, a man who not only opposed the administration's entire policy but who was also a conduit of information to its opponents. The right of the president to control his Cabinet, composed of nonconstitutional offices, had been long established. Indeed, as far back as the administration of John Adams, Secretary Pickering was removed because he had openly opposed the president.

Johnson returned to the Senate, vindicated in his own time, and, when he died, a copy of the Constitution he so valiantly defended was placed at his head, a fitting tribute to a patriot.

J. CRAIG SCHERF
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Joshua Zeitz replies:

I would respectfully remind J. Craig

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Scherf that my article did not maintain the constitutional tenability of the Tenure of Office Act; rather, it suggested that Johnson should have been impeached for more serious offenses than its violation—coddling traitors, inciting violence against a congressman, and failing to uphold such statutes as the Test Oath Act and the Freedman's Bureau Act.

Social insecurity

To the editors:

I can understand Jonathan Chait's indictment of conservative efforts to "save" Social Security by, in reality, killing it ("Security Risk," January 18). I do not, however, understand Chait's endorsement of the Aaron-Reischauer plan for solving Social Security's solvency problems through an independent board rather than individuals investing retirement money in the stock market. This may keep the naïve out of the market, but it still, as Chait says, exposes Social Security beneficiaries to market vagaries. Of even more importance, moving trust fund moneys from federal securities to the stock market could profoundly destabilize both markets.

The reasonable, if impolitic, solution to whatever ails the Social Security program is to: (1) reduce outgo by changing the way in which retirement benefits are paid, giving lesser benefits for 62- and 65-year-olds and full benefits at age 68 or some other actuarially correct age, and (2) increase income by bringing local government employees into the program and increasing the salary and income limits subject to FICA taxes.

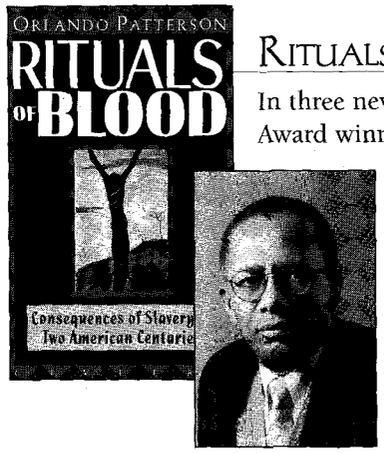
NORMAN G. EWERS
Irvine, California

To the editors:

Investing Social Security funds in equities is really a plan for bailing out not Social Security but the stock market—principally for the benefit of the one percent of the population that owns 40 percent of all financial assets and that has seen those assets rise to prices that many think are at "bubble" levels. The same one percent of the population, by coincidence, is also the source of most of the money in politics. Getting the politicians to introduce Social Security money into the stock market would bear-proof the market and support price-to-earnings ratios so high that stocks would be backed by corporate earnings only in the most nominal sense. In reality, shares would become a preferred class of currency, their value guaranteed by the government.

JOHN HELLEGERS
Jenkintown, Pennsylvania

NEW FROM CIVITAS



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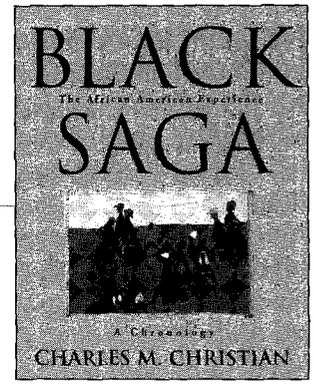

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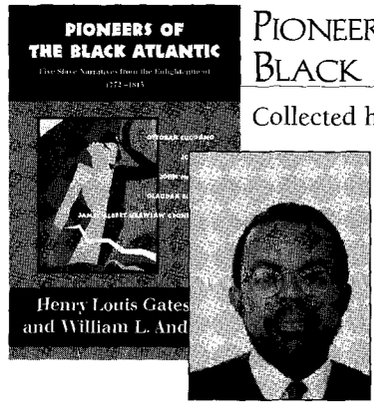

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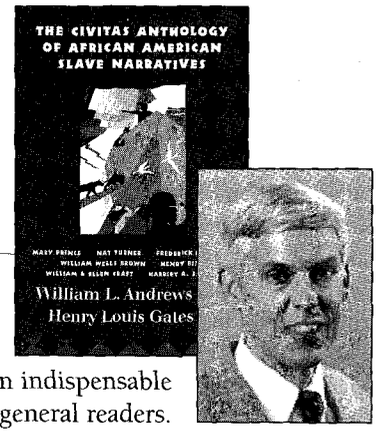

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Where We Stand

A commentary on public education and other critical issues

Solid and Sensible

By SANDRA FELDMAN, President
American Federation of Teachers

Given the continued partisan sniping that we've been seeing in Congress over the past weeks and months, it's important to remember that Americans do agree about certain things, no matter what their political party—and education is one of them. Members of the public are nearly unanimous in their support for high academic standards and teacher quality and in their belief that schools should be held accountable for the job they are doing. In his State of the Union address, President Clinton recognized these concerns and offered a program that ought to command bipartisan Congressional support.

As the President noted, states are making progress in setting higher academic standards and tying those standards to high-school exit exams or other tests. Nationally, test scores and graduation rates are rising, but serious work remains to be done. The President's program will provide states and local school districts with some excellent tools—and it will hold them accountable for getting results.

The President called for all schools to end social promotion, the practice of passing youngsters from grade to grade regardless of whether they have learned the material of the grade. Simply holding kids back is not the answer, and the President recognized that. Kids need early, timely, and appropriate help to keep them from falling behind. The President's proposal would enable schools to give students who are in danger of failing the extra help they need. Whether this help comes in the form of after-school programs or Saturday or summer schools, as is being tried in Chicago, would be up to the schools themselves.

This was just one proposal in a package full of commonsense programs. The President also called on states and districts to:

- **Intervene and redesign failing schools.** The program would provide $200 million to school districts that identify schools whose students consistently fail to meet accepted standards. When it is done right, this process can transform a failing school into one where students are expected to succeed—and do. The Cleveland Teachers Union is working right now with the local school district to set up a process to identify and intervene in low-performing schools. The AFT has been a partner in the process in places such as New York City and Corpus Christi, Texas. With proven programs and effective partnerships, we can help make every school one where we would be happy to send our own child.

The President's education plan deserves both parties' support.

- **Make sure that every class has a qualified teacher.** Testing new teachers to make sure they know their subject matter and their field is one way of making sure that all teachers are well qualified. That is what the President suggests, along with bringing an end to emergency certification and out-of-field teaching. Beginning and struggling teachers will benefit from effective peer assistance and peer review programs, such as those underway in Toledo and Cincinnati; New York City and Rochester; Pittsburgh and Philadelphia; and other cities around the country. And all teachers will benefit from programs that provide greater access to the latest research on effective classroom practices.

- **Adopt and implement sensible discipline policies.** If we want students to learn, schools must be orderly places. Teachers have always known that other efforts to improve learning will not be effective if schools tolerate disorderly conduct and disrespectful behavior. President Clinton's proposal to require states and school districts to adopt discipline policies will help ensure that all students are able to learn in an orderly and safe environment.

- **Let parents know how well their child's school is doing.** The President proposed periodic "report cards" on every school, so parents will know where their local school needs to improve and make changes and can participate in making the changes work.

The President's program puts the responsibility for improving public education where it belongs—on states and local school districts—and it offers help and encouragement in meeting that responsibility. Critics charging that the President's plan would create a "national school board" have begun to substitute campaign rhetoric for reason, and that's too bad. This isn't a partisan proposal; governors of both parties are already implementing many of these reforms.

Americans are tired of partisan battles, and they want our political leaders to start doing the people's work again. The President's education initiative seeks to provide all of our children with safe classrooms and qualified teachers. It encourages high standards for all our students and schools. And it's an approach we should all support. ▮

***Where We Stand* is published once every month in *The New Republic*. To comment, write to Sandra Feldman, AFT, 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20001.** **© Sandra Feldman 1999.** **Visit our web site (http://www.aft.org).**

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

MARCH 1, 1999

AN UNCIVIL ACTION

People kill people. But, contrary to what the National Rifle Association would have you believe, guns do, too. It's certainly not a coincidence that the United States has both the highest murder rate among industrialized nations (though the rate is dropping fast) and the widest availability of firearms.

But, in recent weeks, several cities have seized upon a new gun-control strategy that, no matter how noble its intent, represents a misguided and ultimately self-defeating attempt to circumvent the democratic process. Chicago, Miami, New Orleans, and, most recently, Atlanta have all filed lawsuits against gun manufacturers, seeking financial payments to cover the costs of police work and medical care necessitated by gun violence. Most of these cases are product-liability lawsuits. The claim is that, by failing to install sufficient safety devices, the manufacturers have irresponsibly marketed unsafe products to the public. (Chicago's case is a little different; it charges that the manufacturers have circumvented city gun-control ordinances by deliberately shipping extra supplies to suburban dealers who then sell their wares to city customers.) Given the recent pro-plaintiff settlements in similar lawsuits brought against tobacco companies, it's at least possible that some of these cities might collect millions of dollars.

That the cities have resorted to such measures is not a surprise. Cities bear the brunt of gun violence. Yet, particularly in the South, gun-owner-friendly state legislatures prohibit them from enacting strict gun-control laws. Moreover, given the ease with which firearms cross borders—both city and state—legislating gun control on the metropolitan level is often a futile endeavor (as the Chicago case implicitly proves).

But understandable is not the same as workable—or justifiable. And this crusade is neither. For one thing, a key tenet of American product-liability law is that manufacturers should be held responsible for their negligence in cases of harm stemming from the *proper* use of their product. If you buy a toaster, operate it properly, and then wind up in a debilitating accident because the toaster manufacturer negligently built a defective product, you clearly have some right to redress. But if you get electrocuted trying to fish a chunk of bagel out of the toaster wiring with a butter knife—well, that's what lawyers call contributory negligence.

To be sure, modern product-liability cases have eroded the concept of contributory negligence. But, in their suits against gun manufacturers, the cities would take the erosion to a dangerous new level, further weakening the already battered notion of individual accountability upon which our democratic culture depends. Their claim, in essence, is that gun manufacturers should be liable for what is, by any measure, *improper*, albeit accidental, use of their products. If our goal is to deter gun violence and accidents, do we really want to shift accountability from the killers who pull the triggers, or, perhaps, from parents who leave guns lying around within reach of a child, or from gun dealers who knowingly sell guns to criminals? Is the next step a class-action suit seeking huge money damages from car manufacturers because of the costs of drunken-driving deaths and joyriding by underage car thieves?

Finally—and not least important—this attempt to achieve through lawsuits what has not been achievable through lawmaking is reminiscent of the reliance on litigation that has gotten liberals into so much trouble over the past 25 years. Lasting policy victories are won in the political arena, not the legal one. When crusaders rely too heavily on the courts—the least democratic branch of government—they inevitably skimp on building public support for their causes, thus sowing the seeds for backlash.

So, if gun violence is costing the government money, one well-conceived reaction would be to slap a huge tax on gun sales—and use the money to finance police and health care. (An even better idea might be Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's proposal to slap a tax on bullets.) If the problem is the guns themselves, then government should regulate them strictly or ban them altogether. And, if there's sufficient public support for these measures, and if the state governments—or the U.S. Congress—won't bow to it, then the voters should keep that in mind the next time they go to the polls. Eventually, the only lasting solution to gun violence will be found in new legislation, not jury verdicts. Remember, laws don't undercut democracy; lawsuits do. •

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NOTEBOOK

A NIGGLING ISSUE: District of Columbia residents, you are not alone: the University of Wisconsin, too, is in the middle of a flap over the word "niggardly," meaning "miserly." Amelia Rideau, a junior English major and vice president of the university's Black Student Union, took offense when her professor, Standish Henning, used the archaic word in a class while teaching the similarly archaic classic *The Canterbury Tales*. According to accounts in the local press, Rideau went to Henning after class; he defined the word for her and thanked her for coming to him. The next time the class met, Henning defined the word again, noting that a student had been upset and confused. He asked if anyone else had any thoughts on the matter. Rideau, who says she's the only black student in the class, burst into tears and fled the room, distraught that her professor had repeated the word when she had asked him not to. At an early February faculty senate meeting, she argued that Professor Henning exemplified why the faculty senate needed to replace U.W.'s toothless 17-year-old faculty speech code with a new one that would punish perpetrators *regardless of their intent*. Actually, if ever an incident has proven the absurdity of speech codes, this is it. When U.W. did adopt a stringent student speech code in 1989, students filed complaints about insults like "redneck" and "primitive dinosaurs." One student was even reportedly sanctioned under the code for stealing his roommate's ATM card, because the theft was allegedly motivated by ethnic tension. The code was struck down as unconstitutional in 1991, revised in 1992, and then finally abandoned as unworkable by 1993. A circumspect Professor Henning declined to comment on the most recent controversy, telling an Associated Press reporter, "I think it's best just to let it go." Alas, that's probably the most that could be hoped for at this point.

C ULTURE CLASH: And what would those who've taken offense at "niggardly" think of the defense being mounted on behalf of the Reverend Henry J. Lyons at his trial in Florida? Lyons is charged with stealing copious quantities of cash from the National Baptist Convention, of which he is president, in order to finance a life of luxury and mistresses. The evidence against Lyons seems pretty damning. But, as Lyons's lawyer Grady Irvin explained in his opening statement, Lyons's habit of mingling his own money with the convention's funds represents a "cultural difference" that the jury needs to recognize. "The customs, the practices, the traditions of the National Baptist Convention allowed him to do what he did," said Irvin. Given that the jury is all white, that Lyons is black, and that the convention is the nation's largest black religious organization, or at least claims to be, we can be excused for being a little concerned about Irvin's implication. This is one case in which no one should be miserly with his or her outrage.

D ELAYED REACTION: Texas Congressman and impeachment zealot Tom DeLay has finally said something about the charges of hypocrisy (and even potential illegality) that first appeared in TNR two weeks ago. Readers of that story ("DeLayed Justice," February 15) will recall that reporter Ann Louise Bardach unearthed contradictions between sworn testimony DeLay gave in a 1994 civil lawsuit and his financial disclosure statements to the House of Representatives from the same period. At the time, DeLay refused to comment on the matter, promising merely that the truth would eventually emerge. Now, DeLay has, well, refused to comment on the matter once again. "We have answers for all of that, and it ain't worth talking about," he told the *Houston Chronicle*. In the original article, we noted that it was hardly clear that DeLay broke the law—merely that his behavior seemed remarkably Clintonian. But we didn't realize just how accurate that description was. "I don't see y'all digging into Democrats' pasts," he carped—adding that he is "the most investigated man in America." To be sure, DeLay still has a thing or two to learn before he can pull off such self-pity convincingly. Lucky for him, it now looks like he'll have until 2001 to learn from the master. •

ON THE HILL

PLAYED OUT

By Michelle Cottle

It could have been the weather—a particularly cold and depressing drizzle—that made the Saturday morning trek to Capitol Hill so unbearable. More likely, though, it was the realization that, after so many months, there really was nothing left to say about impeachment and not much more to see. So, while the folks at the press gallery had advised me to arrive early, lest I fail to get a seat for the videotaped testimony of Monica Lewinsky, when I straggled in to the Senate Periodical Press Gallery at 9:45, the place was empty, save for a nattily dressed older gentleman and an untouched spread of bagels and Dunkin' Donuts Munchkins.

Indeed, my arrival seemed to be the morning's biggest news; from behind a low partition, a press officer looked up and chirped, "We are now a press corps of two!" By ten o'clock, our ranks had swelled to four with an additional 20 or so manning seats in the

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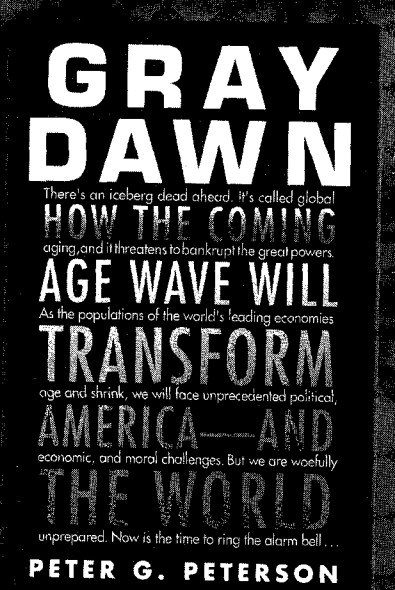
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chamber. It was a sorry turnout compared with the throngs who packed these same halls and seats mere days before. And, judging by the pen drumming and paper shuffling of the hearty souls in attendance, even *their* enthusiasm for the enterprise had all but vanished.

And who could blame them? The impeachment fight had been over for weeks, the outcome clear as day: Senate Democrats would block conviction; House managers would whine and pule about how they were prevented from presenting a proper prosecution. A few niggling side-debates would linger on—to censure or not to censure, to investigate or ignore Blumenthal v. Hitchens—but nothing of true import was left to happen. The president is a cad, but he'll survive. Long live the cad.

But, while the scandal has outlived its usefulness, impeachment has plodded along just the same. At the trial's start, proceduralism was cloaking tawdriness; by last weekend, it was cloaking pointlessness. So, on Saturday, the curtain went up as planned, and the bit players sprang into action. Dark-suited pages whispered down the aisles, delivering messages and refilling water glasses. Ushers rotated silent spectators into and out of the galleries every few minutes. Stenographers circulated through the chamber with military precision, the recording machines strapped to their chests, giving them the look of USO cigarette girls. In her usual spot at the back of the room, the House Democrats' self-appointed impeachment trial watchdog, Representative Sheila Jackson Lee—resplendent in a fire-engine red ensemble—sat with her notepad on her knee.

Center stage, the major players threw themselves into their performances. The House managers had clearly worked hard to construct a mini-documentary on presidential sins, sifting through hours of tape and stringing together the most damning snippets. In between the short clips, James Rogan, followed by Asa Hutchinson, put the prosecutorial spin on what viewers had just seen. After a few minutes, a vaguely hypnotic rhythm was established: Show a clip, spin the clip. Show a clip, spin it. Clip. Spin. Clip. Spin.

Then came the White House. With equal parts energy and condescension, attorney Nicole Seligman promptly set about respinning the clips. With their strategic editing, she charged, House managers had "distorted," "omitted," and "created a profoundly erroneous impression." To illustrate her point, Seligman played a longer, continuous clip from the Lewinsky testimony—one that, unsurprisingly, made the issue of presidential guilt more ambiguous. Yet it wasn't long before Seligman, too, fell into the familiar rhythm: Clip. Spin. Clip. Spin.

During the breaks, the halls swelled with senators delivering their well-rehearsed lines. Republican Larry Craig marveled at how "devastating" the prosecution's presentation had been to the White House; Democrat Barbara Boxer held forth in another corner about the flimsiness of the managers' case. On and on the players sang—as if this drama's ending were in doubt.

In the press room, conversation touched on everything but the contents of the testimony. There was much talk about the poofiness of Monica's coiffure and speculation as to whether Seligman had recently hennaed her own schoolgirl bob. CNN's periodic updates from Amman, where Jordanians were holding a deathwatch for King Hussein, and from Rambouillet, France, where diplomats labored to end the slaughter in Kosovo, were good for fleeting moments of relevance. But conversation inevitably lagged, and talk inevitably turned to movies—which proved the high point of the day since my nattily dressed gallery mate turned out to be celebrity scribbler Dominick Dunne. A long-standing member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Dunne unfailingly casts his vote come Oscar time, and our tiny group was eager for his thoughts on this year's contenders (*Saving Private Ryan* or *Shakespeare in Love* will win the award for best picture, he says, though there's hope that no single film will sweep the major categories).

Back inside the chamber, the senators split into two factions: slumpers and fidgeters. Among the fidgeters, Joe Lieberman squirmed endlessly, periodically leaning over to whisper in Dianne Feinstein's ear; Larry Craig worked on what he quipped to *The New York Times* were his "impeachment series" doodles. The slumpers were even more numerous. At one point, an entire row of Republicans—Kit Bond, Rod Grams, Jon Kyl, Fred Thompson, and John McCain—slouched sideways in their chairs, chins propped up on their hands, staring dully at the video screen.

Some of the more versatile members shifted between the two modes. One minute, Democrat Tim Johnson was surreptitiously thumbing through a copy of the president's budget and a recent issue of TNR. The next, he was riding perilously low in his seat, gripping the armrests as if to prevent himself from sliding to the floor. Can it be that not even this magazine's scintillating political coverage could overcome the deadening effects of an impeachment trial that had overstayed its welcome? •

WHITE HOUSE WATCH

JOE COOL

By Dana Milbank

It is the White House correspondent's equivalent of suicide to write an unflattering article about the president's press secretary. With that in mind, let me start with the following statement: I think Joe Lockhart is a swell guy. And very handsome, too.

Lockhart is so swell and handsome, in fact, that I hesitate to point out a curious dichotomy I noticed when

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discussing the new press secretary with White House reporters. When reporters were willing to be quoted by name, they used such terms as "genuine," "extremely helpful," and "very available." (Note to Joe: I agree entirely.) When reporters were *not* willing to be named, they used words like "ferocious," "oafish," and "Fred Flintstone." (Note to Joe: Call me for their names.)

In truth, Lockhart fits both descriptions at times. Yes, Lockhart, after four months on the job, can be a bit *yabba dabba doo* on the podium, particularly compared to his smooth predecessor, Mike McCurry. And he is an unapologetic partisan, recasting the White House spokesman as more of an advocate for the president. Where McCurry was often too frank for his White House colleagues' tastes, Lockhart shields his boss. This, of course, has won him broad support inside the White House. "People see Lockhart as the palace guard on the ramparts ready to throw hot oil on people as they walk in," says one Clinton aide.

JOE LOCKHART BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

And yet Lockhart's pugnacious style so far hasn't alienated the press, which respects him because of his access to Clinton. Reporters have accepted his gruff approach as an inevitable consequence of the impeachment proceedings. But, as the impeachment trial ends this week, both the press and the president's aides will be watching to see whether Lockhart can shift from G.I. Joe to a new role: Nice Joe, policy pitch-man.

"It's certainly my hope," Lockhart told me this week. After three months of fielding little but impeachment questions, he's had plenty of time to get up to speed on policy matters, and he says he's ready to shift. "There will be less opportunity to speak about issues in a partisan way," he says. And besides, he adds, "I'm not really that mean."

Neither is he cuddly. After Lockhart inherited the top job, the Republicans' impeachment drive hardened his partisan instincts. His blocking for the president irked reporters, who peppered him about Clinton's growing unavailability. Finally, on January 12, the anger exploded at a briefing. "It's bad to keep reporters away from the president," a questioner lectured. "Access to the president has been nonexistent," protested another. "Is he afraid of answering questions?" A red-hot Lockhart fumed that reporters were trying to embarrass him, and he posed the briefing-room equivalent of "You want to settle this outside?"

Later, a calmer Lockhart privately smoothed things over with reporters. The next day, he tried a full grovel. "I really needed to find some way to search for that inner peace and calm," he declared. He said he needed a "special friend," like Chief of Staff John Podesta's evil twin, Skippy. "You all can decide what his name is," Lockhart said. A reporter volunteered: "Nice Joe?" Soon after, the press got its session with Clinton.

From the start, Lockhart has been embraced by White House aides who wanted an advocate at the podium. McCurry liked to say that his office was 50 feet from the Oval Office and 50 feet from the press room and that he served both president and press equally. Reporters liked that, but Clinton advisers' suspicions about his loyalty to the president were confirmed when he described Clinton as "exasperatingly stupid in his personal life" after stepping down. "A lot of people inside thought his real client was the press corps, not the White House," says one former lieutenant. "At least Joe is getting the president's message out there, not doing a nudge-nudge-wink-wink to show he doesn't believe it." Adds one of Clinton's top advisers: "I don't buy this B.S. that the press secretary is equidistant between the press corps and the Oval Office. Why should the press secretary work equally for Walt Disney or General Electric [the owners of ABC and NBC, respectively] as for the president?"

McCurry, for his part, says the difference in style has been exaggerated by events. "I had the advantage of being able to leave and be the press's best friend,"

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McCurry says. "The rules get set aside in the awful circumstance of impeachment. You think Mike McCurry would've been the nice guy? No way." Still, Lockhart acknowledges he's a combatant. "I see myself as someone who believes in what the president is doing, and a good part of my job is finding ways to articulate it," he says. Lockhart has been on both sides, doing stints for NBC, ABC, CNN, and Sky News, mixed with time on the Hill and in various Democratic campaigns before becoming Clinton's campaign spokesman in '96. The 39-year-old Georgetown graduate turned down a lucrative offer from America Online when he joined the White House press office in hopes that he could land the top job when McCurry left.

Lockhart's colleagues say he isn't at heart a policy guy like McCurry, but he takes a greater interest in strategy. When Erskine Bowles was chief of staff, two dozen White House communications advisers met daily in Podesta's office after the senior staff meetings. But when Bowles left and Podesta replaced him, the spin meetings came to a halt. Lockhart restarted them in his office. "Joe just started a Joe meeting," one participant says. "The center of gravity shifted over."

On camera, Lockhart inevitably falls short of McCurry. Slowly, though, he has loosened up, letting one-liners fly. "Once you get in the habit of doing it four or five times a week, you realize the world isn't going to end if I say the wrong thing," he says. So far, Lockhart has avoided big missteps. Before the Iraq bombing, Lockhart, who knew when the strike would take place, subtly indicated to the networks behind the scenes that a strike was imminent—but without confirming or denying anything. Similarly, when the bogus story of a Clinton love child surfaced at his morning "gaggle," Lockhart, after an angry overreaction, spoke privately with reporters to derail the questions. "Joe's probably not as popular as Mike, and he's not as skilled as Mike, but he's got the same instincts," says Carl Cannon, who covers the White House for *National Journal*.

Journalists will forgive a bit of clumsiness on the podium if they get the feeding they need behind the scenes. Here, Lockhart is at his best. CNN's Wolf Blitzer compares Lockhart favorably to Dee Dee Myers ("You couldn't go to the bank on something you had from Dee Dee") and even to McCurry ("You could tell after the scandal broke, the access went away"). ABC's Sam Donaldson says he counts on Lockhart's guidance before the evening news. "I go to Lockhart frequently before the six-thirty," he says.

Everybody, though, will be less forgiving of Lockhart now that impeachment is over. Lockhart needs to build goodwill to gain ink and airtime for Clinton's proposals. He'll need a smooth touch, more massaging of the press than he's done so far, and a more accessible president. Some wonder whether Nice Joe can pull it off—but not me. I think he's swell. And did I mention handsome? •

So much for Africa's "new leaders."

BATTLE HORN

By Frank Smyth

When President Clinton took his historic twelve-day tour of Africa last year, he singled out tiny Eritrea and its larger neighbor Ethiopia as beacons of hope for the beleaguered continent. In Clinton's mind—and in the minds of others in the West like Oxfam International and the World Bank—Eritrea's president, Isaias Afwerki, and Ethiopia's prime minister, Meles Zenawi, represented a new breed of African statesmen. Intolerant of corruption and committed to free-market reforms, Isaias and Meles were considered to be among the likely leaders of an African renaissance. But now, less than a year after this renaissance was heralded by President Clinton, the two men—and their impoverished countries—are at war.

The war on Africa's Horn may be the most dramatic and bloodiest chapter in the rapid disintegration of an alliance among a group of African leaders—commonly referred to as the "new leaders"—that once held much promise. In 1996, Isaias and Meles, along with Uganda's Yoweri Museveni and Rwanda's Paul Kagame (who, like Isaias and Meles, are former Marxist guerrillas), formed a bloc that was engaged in joint military campaigns from the Red Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda—with the help of $20 million in nonlethal aid from the United States—were all backing rebels in Sudan against that country's radical Islamist government. Further south, Rwanda, Uganda, and Eritrea—and, later, Angola—joined forces in Zaire to help Laurent Kabila overthrow the corrupt postcolonial despot Mobutu Sese Seko.

But, not long after Kabila seized power in May 1997, renaming Zaire the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the bloc of "new leaders" began to splinter. Rwanda and Uganda fell out with Kabila as he became more independent of his former patrons. By July 1998, the same countries that had helped bring down Mobutu began fighting again in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They and other states are still waging war in Central Africa—only now Uganda and Rwanda are battling Angola, among other states.

It is the Horn War, though, that most concerns Western observers. Ever since May and June 1998, when Eritrea and Ethiopia launched artillery attacks and air strikes against each other in a dispute over their 620-mile-long border, the United States has been working feverishly to head off a full-fledged conflict between the two countries. At first, the United States had some

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success, brokering a cease-fire. But attempts to secure a more lasting peace bogged down, and, on February 6, after months of escalating tensions, a full-scale war broke out. While Ethiopia's economy is eight times greater than Eritrea's, and its population is 17 times the size, the smaller country's stronger nationalist identity should make this fight a protracted one—one of potentially epic proportions. "It could become the biggest war ever in sub-Saharan Africa," frets one senior Defense Department official, "or at least since the [South African] Boer War" at the turn of the century.

Eritrea and Ethiopia are among Africa's poorest nations, and the irony of their war is that, ostensibly at least, both sides are fighting over nothing. The main flashpoint is a border region of hardscrabble terrain called Badame, which translates in the local language as "empty." After Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia in 1993, their common border was never clearly delineated. In recent years, many former Ethiopian guerrillas have moved into the Badame region to farm small plots of land, displacing Eritrean farmers who were already working the same plots. Finally, in July 1997, after a few heated but still bloodless incidents between the ex-guerrillas and the peasants, Isaias and Meles agreed to form a joint commission to draw the boundary.

But, before an agreement could be reached, local Ethiopian authorities took matters into their own hands. Last May, Ethiopian militia in the Badame region began a new wave of expulsions of Eritrean peasants. When an Eritrean Army unit sought out the local militia to negotiate on behalf of the newly displaced Eritrean peasants, the Ethiopian militia opened fire, leaving three Eritrean officers and one soldier dead. Eritrea responded to the incident by deploying troops in the Badame region and then, on May 12, by seizing even more territory there and at two other areas along the border to the east. Eritrean officials privately admit that, for tactical reasons, some of the ground they then occupied went beyond the country's admittedly fuzzy borders and actually included Ethiopian terrain.

The Ethiopians retaliated by bombing Eritrea's airport. But, more than 20 minutes after that attack, one Eritrean plane bombed an Ethiopian school, killing 44 people and wounding 135 others, most of them children. Even after Eritrea and Ethiopia agreed to a cease-fire last June, both countries scrambled to buy artillery, armored vehicles, jet fighters, and other arms. (Today, Eritrea still has fewer jets than Ethiopia and no helicopter gunships.) Ethiopia also escalated tensions by deporting more than 52,000 people of Eritrean descent.

Of course, this is not literally a war over nothing. The conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia has also been fueled by clashing economic interests. In November 1997, Eritrea issued its own currency, the nakfa, after having used the Ethiopian birr for four years. While Eritrean officials wanted Ethiopia to accept the nakfa in a one-to-one exchange rate with the birr, Ethiopian officials instead demanded that Eritrea pay for all its goods in hard currency, which both sides lacked. Soon, trucks loaded with goods backed up on both sides of the border, while ships waited to unload their cargo at Assab, one of two Eritrean ports on the Red Sea.

The Assab port is another source of contention between the two countries. Although Assab has long been administratively part of Eritrea, dating back to when Eritrea was an Italian colony, the port is linked by paved road to Addis Ababa and has traditionally served as Ethiopia's only port. (Eritrea's other port is Massawa, which is connected by paved road with its capital, Asmara.) In 1993, as part of Eritrea's peaceful secession from Ethiopia, Meles made Ethiopia a landlocked nation when he relinquished Assab to his Eritrean comrades as part of his promise to restore to Eritrea the territories it enjoyed when it was an Italian colony. And, while Ethiopian diplomats today say they make no claims on Assab, Eritrean officials contend that the entire border war may merely be a ploy by Ethiopia to retake the port—which, until Ethiopia began boycotting it last May, generated 18 percent of Eritrea's total revenues from the fees and duties leveled on Ethiopian goods.

The final irony of the war is that, if these two countries cannot coexist peacefully under the leadership of Isaias and Meles, it's doubtful that they ever will. Both Isaias and Meles are members of the Tigrinya ethnic group and speak the Tigrinya language—the only language common to both countries. The two men, and the respective guerrilla movements that now run each state, struggled together to depose the Soviet-backed regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. Two years later, in 1993, Meles and Isaias agreed to Eritrea's secession from Ethiopia. Until blood was first drawn last May, Meles and Isaias long addressed each other, in letters and face-to-face meetings, as "comrade."

Indeed, Meles had been far more sympathetic to Eritrea than most other Ethiopians. While Isaias is genuinely popular across Eritrea, Meles is not well-liked in Ethiopia. Many Ethiopians, particularly members of the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups, despise Meles, whose Tigrinyan ethnic group is a distinct minority in Ethiopia. Warns one Ethiopian diplomat: Eritrea will "never find an Ethiopian government as friendly to them as the present government." If Meles falls, things could actually get worse between the two countries.

But it's hard to imagine anything much worse than the trench warfare that now rages on Africa's Horn. While many are tempted to compare the hostilities to other African conflicts, the Horn War is more reminiscent of the Iran-Iraq War or World War I. The likelihood of carnage and exhaustion of resources serves only to sap the hope that both Isaias and Meles once brought to the Horn. Not long ago, Africa's new leaders promised new beginnings. But all they do now is wage wars. Their beacons faded surprisingly fast.

FRANK SMYTH is coauthor of "Africa's New Bloc," published in the March/April 1998 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

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A benign dynast passes.

KING AND COUNTRY

By Martin Peretz

Baruch ato adonai elohenu melech ha'olam asher halak m'kvodo l'basar v'dam. "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has given of His honor to flesh and blood." This is an ancient prayer of tribute that Jews were instructed to pronounce when they encountered royalty. There are no Jews in Jordan. But Jordan is neighbor to the Jewish state, and King Hussein was bred with the understanding that peace in his region meant accommodation with that dispersed people which had, as in a dream, returned to its home.

It is something his great-uncle, the Emir Faisal (later king) of Iraq, also knew deeply, and it was this galvanizing instinct of the Hashemites to negotiate with the Zionists that made Hussein's grandfather, King Abdullah, the victim of a fanatic's bullet as he exited Al Aqsa in Jerusalem. This was precisely the blood of his family that Hussein evoked unforgettably at Yitzhak Rabin's funeral. Perhaps this helps explain why Israelis themselves seemed to trust this monarch more than their own political leaders. His condolence call on the families of seven Jewish girls slain by a deranged Jordanian soldier touched everyone in Israel deeply, and while Hussein lay on his deathbed one mother whom Hussein had comforted gave birth to another girl she named Jordan. Legatees of reason such as Hussein are usually all that a culture whose glory is more past than future (and which culture's isn't?) has to protect itself against the lure of the *enragés*.

I twice uttered this prayer for princes at table with the king and also on other occasions with one of his nephews, Talal, the pellucid son of Hussein's younger brother, Mohammed. I felt this invocation as concrete petition. But prayer does not guarantee God's protection even to the most worthy, and it didn't for the monarch. I must confess, then, that, almost like the bereft people of Jordan with their so palpable emotions obvious on television, I grieved and trembled that he was taken so early from the post his ancestors had bequeathed him. After all, unlike the royalty of Saudi Arabia (who are both far richer and far more influential with the U.S. foreign policy establishment), he descends not from raiders and robbers of pilgrims on the road to Mecca but, as tradition has it, from the Prophet himself. This kind of authority is at once political and moral. Which is why, though Yasir Arafat both aspires and conspires to run Jerusalem's Muslim holy places for his ends, it is only Hussein's heir who is their proper custodian and servant, the sharif.

Everybody in the Islamic world knows this, and it may explain why even those Arab leaders who had contracts out on the king's life, who undermined the security and economy of his country, and who supported terrorism against it came to Amman for the funeral. These tyrants—Hafez al-Assad of Syria, the vice president of Iraq, the son of Muammar Qaddafi, and the most pampered of the murderous lot, the chairman of the Palestinian Authority—were there not only because they had to be but because they thought that some of his goodness might be seen to rub off on them. After the burial Jordan will still face its old enmities and enemies.

Character itself cannot defend against the brutal. But the United States might make it clearer than it has that Jordan is under American protection. There are two dimensions to this guarantee. The first would none too subtly address both Syria and Iraq, whose designs on the kingdom are almost open. In one sense, to subdue and suppress Jordan would gratify either one of the country's ambitions to confront Israel on a long frontier over which live restive and resentful Palestinians hostile both to the Jews and to Jordan. But Jordan itself is a tempting target for the dictators. Assad's delusions of Greater Syria extend all the way to Cyprus, and he has already swallowed up Lebanon with literally no audible dissent from the West. Saddam thinks himself the ruler of Mesopotamia, another piece of mesmerizing cartography without delineating borders. Nevertheless, axiomatically for the Iraqi Baath, Jordan fits within them.

To be sure, when Bill Clinton was momentarily feeling Jordan's pain, he offered it some financial and arms relief, and it is at least possible that he will deliver. But, as soon as Arafat whines for more of this and that, if the recent past is a lesson, Clinton is likely to cede Jordanian interests and Jordanian rights. In U.S. politics, then, American Jews are the kingdom's most effective potential lobby. That depends, however, on their grasping that the kingdom's plausibility and power are not only the sole harbingers of hope for humane rule in Jordan; they are also what tip the scales for a reasonable peace between Jews and Arabs.

The king's funeral was virtually without pomp, and such pageantry as there was didn't overawe. Even the order of march for the visiting dignitaries seemed like neither order nor march. This is a modest polity; modest men run it. Up to now they've allowed the resident Palestinians—in contrast to other Arab countries, the exile Palestinians are citizens in Jordan—dominion in the economy and real participation in politics, including several Cabinet ministers. But they've discouraged Palestinians from trying to make careers in the military or in the security apparatus. This is only prudent, and for this order prudence is the first line of defense.

Predictably, there is much talk about democratic reform, usually unspecified in nature, and it is pressed most by those with the least democratic of instincts. (In emerging Palestine, for example, the putative democrats are

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the most intolerant and the most dogmatic; they also want, not coincidentally, to continue a war, some war, any war, with Israel.) In Jordan, the Islamicists are the most provocative democrats—like in Algeria, where the hyperpious are also hyper-murderous. But there is another difference: the Hashemites are not like the Algerian state, not by a long shot. The monarchy survived because it recognized its enemies. But this is hardly a night-and-fog regime. Some societies are better off under kings than presidents. In the Arab world, the rulers who are the cruelest and the most bloodthirsty are not the dynasts but those who rule amid stage-managed popular acclaim.

The day before the funeral the successor to the throne, Abdullah II, greeted officials and dignitaries. They kissed the new king on both cheeks. A new way of greeting? In the old days, which was only last week, when the court and other loyalists approached the father, King Hussein, they would brush his shoulder or his forehead with their lips, a clear sign of fealty and of homage. What does the new way signify? Is there a peril in suggesting a more equal relationship? Well, it will not, of course, be called egalitarianism. But, in societies unprepared for it, even constitutionalism is a temptation for the reckless and the enthusiasts. On its road to democratic dispensation, Jordan is best served by caution. Real democracy has to ripen. Reform can often cloak betrayal. •

Last rites for the Hashemites?

HEIR JORDAN

By David Pryce-Jones

King Hussein of Jordan was a man of authority, responsible, regal with a popular touch, enlivened by a playboy delight in glamorous women and speedboats and piloting his own aircraft and building palaces, a radio ham, fond of money and generous with it, and a small and muscular fellow laughing in a good bass voice at the follies of others but quite sure to have reliable bodyguards, if not to go armed himself. In his own country, among his people and accessible to them, he was a contemporary version of the classical caliph, Haroun al-Rashid, who made it his business to talk to his subjects to learn their opinions.

Democracy in this century has made many advances and won famous victories, but not in the Arab world. There, one-man rulers are still supreme, and they come in two categories. Some are careerists who have seized power in a coup. Others are dynastic heirs to thrones or sultanates, legitimately in office as well as in power. All alike have to rely on patronage and the secret police, the two great instruments of absolutism. All in the end are tyrants, but the degree of their tyranny depends upon character, personal ambition, egoism, and compassion. The man himself, and so the whole society, is consequently always under a strain which at any moment may founder in bloodshed.

Arab dynastic rulers are unlikely to have the sort of dark implacable character with which to defeat those who would kill them and take power in their place. Fifty years ago, King Farouk of Egypt, a man of humor under his debauched appearance, quipped that soon there would be only five kings in the world: the kings of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades, and the king of England. He himself was unable to resist when Gamal Abdel Nasser, then a low-ranking army officer, mounted a successful coup against him. Typical of the careerist tyrant, Nasser claimed to be introducing democracy while actually converting Egypt into a local imitation of the Soviet Union.

King Hussein was able to defend himself. When his own life or the country's future was at stake, he was ruthless. In victory, though, he knew when to stand down the firing squad, when to be lenient about prison sentences, and when to provide for widows and orphans. Magnanimity, a spirit of humanity, distinguished him from the likes of Nasser, Hafez al-Assad, and Saddam Hussein, and they would have destroyed him if they could.

The one card in his hand was his claim to descent from the Prophet Mohammed, hardly a trump even if it could be authenticated. His family, the Hashemites, had long held the post of hereditary keepers of the Muslim shrines at Mecca and Medina. Backwoods aristocrats, members of the family fought among themselves for the rewards of this post, and the Ottoman overlords duly kept the peace by exiling one or another of them to Constantinople. The last to hold this post effectively was Sharif Hussein, King Hussein's great-grandfather, an old rascal who used to go down to his palace dungeon to beat the prisoners there personally. In 1916, he calculated that the Ottomans were about to lose World War I, and the moment had come for revolt leading to independence with the sponsorship of the British.

Sound in principle, the calculation misfired in practice. In his masterly study *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth*, Elie Kedourie has demonstrated that Sharif Hussein and the British both believed that they had the firm agreements they wanted. The sharif assumed that he would be "king of the Arabs" and independent, while the British supposed that they had set clear limits to his power. Both sides based their opinions on mutual misunderstandings of intentions and documents, down to the level of incorrect translations between English and Arabic. If the British were to be blamed, it was for allowing another of their clients, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, to drive the Hashemites out of Mecca and Medina by force and set himself up as king of the new Saudi Arabia, though not of all Arabs. A few years later, Sharif Hussein died in exile. The British had not anticipated either war against the Ottomans or Arab independence, and they had no clear idea of what the post-Ottoman order ought to be. Ibn Saud's campaign of self-aggrandizement had disagreeably surprised them. In a complex sequence of

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events, they made kings of Faisal and Abdullah, both sons of Sharif Hussein, and created kingdoms for them out of Iraq and Jordan, respectively.

The Iraq experiment was a disaster, one of the worst conceived acts in the history of the British empire, and many innocent people are still paying for it today. A Sunni Muslim himself, Faisal ruled a population made up mostly of Shiites and Kurds, and realistically they saw their new king as an imposition, an Anglo-Sunni monstrosity. Nothing could make these various and recalcitrant people into loyal subjects of the new kingdom, and the Royal Air Force was soon bombing them into submission with gas and high explosives. Faisal's son, Ghazi, an out-and-out playboy, killed himself in a high-speed car wreck. In a coup inspired in 1958 by Nasser and the Soviet Union, Faisal II, the last Hashemite king in Baghdad, was murdered in the street. Since then, Iraq has been at the mercy of some of the least merciful tyrants of the modern age.

Improbable though it was, the Jordan experiment succeeded. Abdullah converted apparent weakness into strength. Few in number, his Bedouin population was reasonably homogenous. But the emergence of Israel confronted him with an existential crisis. He risked losing his kingdom in an escalating war with Israel. The Palestinians were evidently ruined, so he took his chance to incorporate those who fled to Jordan and as much of their land as he could with impunity. His army captured and held the West Bank and East Jerusalem. To some Palestinians, Jordan and Israel appeared to be in a carve-up at their expense. A small group of early Palestinian terrorists took revenge by assassinating Abdullah in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. His grandson and heir, the 16-year-old King Hussein, was standing beside him, and one bullet ricocheted off a medal on his chest, harmlessly. That whole drama certified a belief in himself and his fortunes.

Succeeding his grandfather (after a brief and erratic period of rule by his mentally ill father, Talal), the young King Hussein understood that judgment on him and his reign would depend upon whatever accommodation could be reached with Israel and the Palestinians. His preferred solution was—and remained—a direct peace treaty between the two neighboring sovereign states of Israel and Jordan, confirming Jordan's right to the land captured in 1948 and control of the destiny of the Palestinians with it.

Nasser cared nothing for the Palestinians, but with malign skill he saw how to exploit their plight to suit his ambitions. In order to frustrate the Jordanian policy of accepting Israel and incorporating half of Palestine and a majority of Palestinians, Nasser and his propagandists day after day insulted Hussein as the "treacherous dwarf." Obtaining Soviet arms and sponsorship for himself and for Palestinian guerrillas, Nasser forced the whole Middle East into the front line of the cold war.

Thinking that Moscow would ultimately guarantee him victory, Nasser provoked the Six Day War of 1967. All involved were losers from it, including Israel, which had to take the Palestinian issue inescapably upon itself. Shattered, Nasser died soon afterward. But, by means of a cunning lie at the outset that he was already winning the war, Nasser had been able to pressure King Hussein into joining in.

Within a matter of hours, the king had lost everything that his grandfather had won earlier. He could no longer speak for the Palestinians who now found themselves unwillingly under Israeli occupation on the West Bank and in Gaza. Fired by nationalism, they believed that violence alone could restore them their rights. Yasir Arafat, an old-style careerist leader, duly built the Palestine Liberation Organization into a force fitted for that purpose. Allowance must be made for the difficult circumstances in which he was cornered, but King Hussein's misjudgment in 1967 was the cause of much of the bloodshed and misery in the region over the more than 30 years since then. In 1970, he had to order his army to put down a PLO uprising in his own capital, Amman. In due course, Lebanon and the Israeli-occupied territories were to experience more intense or protracted Palestinian violence. It was, in part, fear of the pro-Iraqi Palestinians in his midst that led King Hussein to yet another misjudgment when he sided with Saddam Hussein in the Gulf war of 1991.

The collapse of the Soviet Union lifted the cold war off the Middle East. No longer having anything to gain from Moscow, Arafat and the PLO could make peace with Israel. The Oslo accords, and then the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, at last buried Nasser's disastrous legacy. By now, the PLO is a recognized member of the international community. It remains uncertain whether the PLO will obtain limited autonomy or statehood and, if the latter, within what boundaries. But its final territorial achievements can be only at the expense of Israel or Jordan, or both. At the end of his life, King Hussein found that, since his grandfather's day, Jordan's existential crisis had been modified only in the details. The Israeli Labor Party is willing to accept Palestinian statehood. For King Hussein, this carried the implicit risk that the Palestinians in Jordan, now a majority there, might overthrow the royal family for the sake of a Greater Palestine. The Likud Party used to assert that Jordan is Palestine, but the more the PLO presses its claims to statehood, the greater its interest in maintaining the integrity of Jordan. In a somewhat strange and paradoxical alliance, King Hussein moved toward Likud.

One-man rulers, dynastic or careerist, habitually do their worst. Honorably, King Hussein did his best. In his reign, Jordanians had much to be thankful for. The strain of being a dynastic one-man ruler falls on his son, the 37-year-old Abdullah. Like his father before him, Abdullah will be judged by the accommodations he reaches with Israel and the Palestinians. If he gets it right, he may be the man to introduce into the Arab world the power-sharing and democracy it so badly needs. If he gets it wrong, he will be the last Hashemite to rule.

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Strong stuff

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MEDICAL EVOLUTION

By Gregg Easterbrook

For John Gearhart, a biologist at Johns Hopkins University, professional life had been an exercise in slamming against walls. Gearhart's specialty is Down's syndrome, triggered when one of the infant body's chromosomes copies itself once too often. Gearhart had spent 20 years trying to puzzle out this genetic error. "All our data suggested that Down's was caused by something that happens quite early in embryo genesis," he says—but the only way to find out what happens then would be to conduct experiments on human embryos, a prospect repugnant at best. Trying to think his way out of the problem, Gearhart wondered; What if there was a way to isolate and culture embryonic "stem cells," the precursors of all body parts? If they could be transferred to the laboratory, it might become possible to study the cytology of conception.

Stem cells are the philosopher's stones of biology, magical objects capable of metamorphosing into any component of the body: heart, nerves, blood, bone, muscle. Mammal embryos begin as a clump of stem cells that gradually subdivides into the specific functional parts of the organism. Researchers have long assumed that, because stem cells are genetically programmed to change into other things, it would never be possible to control them, let alone culture them. But Gearhart and another researcher working independently, James Thomson of the University of Wisconsin, found this is not so.

Three months ago, Gearhart and Thomson announced that they had each isolated embryonic stem cells and induced them to begin copying themselves without turning into anything else. In so doing, they apparently discovered a way to make stem cells by the billions, creating a biological feedstock that might, in turn, be employed to produce brand-new, healthy human tissue. That is, they discovered how to fabricate the stuff of which humanity is made.

Researchers had already demonstrated that stem cells might be a medical boon by showing that such tissues extracted from aborted fetuses could reverse symptoms of Parkinson's disease. But so many fetuses were required to treat just one patient that the technique could never be practical, to say nothing of its harrowing character. By contrast, Gearhart and Thomson have found that stem cells can be reproduced roughly in the way that pharmaceutical manufacturers make drugs.

If researchers can convert stem cells into regular ce like blood or heart muscle and then put them back in the body, then physicians might cure Parkinson's, d betes, leukemia, heart congestion, and many other m adies, replacing failing cells with brand-new tissu Costly afflictive procedures such as bone-marrow tra plants might become easier and cheaper with t arrival of stem-cell-based "universal donor" tissue th does not provoke the immune-rejection response. T need for donor organs for heart or liver transplai might fade, as new body parts are cultured artificial Ultimately, mastery of the stem cell might lead to pr tical, affordable ways to eliminate many genetic disea through DNA engineering, while extending the hum life span. Our near descendants might live in a world which such killers as cystic fibrosis and sickle-cell a mia are one-in-a-million conditions, while additio decades of life are the norm.

Granted, sensational promises made for new medi technologies don't always come to pass, and so researchers are skeptical about whether stem-cell te nology will pan out. But Harold Varmus, head of t National Institutes of Health (NIH), recently declar "This research has the potential to revolutionize t practice of medicine." Notes John Fletcher, a bioethi at the University of Virginia, "Soon every parent wh child has diabetes or any cell-failure disease is going be riveted to this research, because it's the answer." R McKay, a stem-cell researcher at the National Instit of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, says, "We are n at the center of biology itself." Simply put, the cont of human stem cells may open the door to the great medical discovery since antibiotics.

But there are disquieting aspects to stem-c research, too. The first is that, for now, the o way to start the process of controlled stem-c duplication is to extract samples from e human life. Gearhart used fetuses aborted by Baltim women; Thomson, embryos no longer wanted by W consin in vitro fertilization (IVF) clinics. Gearh Thomson, and other stem-cell researchers propos continue drawing on such "resources," as some blo less medical documents refer to the fetus and

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embryo. This is possible because, even though Congress has placed a moratorium on federal funding for experimentation on most IVF embryos and most kinds of fetal tissue, no law governs what scientists can do to incipient life using private funding, either in research settings or within the burgeoning IVF industry.

Because the rules have banned embryo research by federally funded biologists, but not comparable private science, Congress has created the preposterous situation in which most stem-cell research is not being done by publicly funded scientists who must pass multiple levels of peer review and disclose practically everything about their work. Instead, most stem-cell science is in the hands of corporate-backed researchers. Gearhart's and Thomson's projects, for example, are being underwritten by Geron, a company whose name derives from "gerontology," and which anticipates a licensing El Dorado if stem-cell-based good health can be patented and sold to the seniors' market. "That a sensitive category of research is legal for people who are not publicly accountable, but illegal for those who are accountable, is just very strange," says Thomson.

But the greatest anxiety about stem-cell research is that it will make human cloning respectable. Many of the techniques being perfected for the medical application of stem cells are just a hop, skip, and a jump away from those that could apply to reproductive cloning. Society isn't even close to thinking through the legal, ethical, regulatory, and religious implications, but, thanks to stem-cell research, cloning may arrive much, much sooner than anyone expects.

Stem cells stand in the vanguard of human life. When a sperm penetrates an egg, it triggers a majestic sequence whose first step is to create a new structure that is composed mainly of stem cells. Biologists call such cells "undifferentiated," meaning they have not yet decided what they will be. Once the fertilized ovum implants in the uterus, differentiation starts. Some stem cells become placenta; others begin differentiating into the baby's organs, tissue, or blood. A stem cell might divide into any of the many components of the body, but, once it does, it can only continue growing as that part.

Because once a stem cell begins to differentiate it cannot turn back, biologists assumed that all stem cells could never turn back. But, in 1981, experimenters succeeded in extracting stem cells from the embryos of mice. By the mid-'90s, researchers had learned which chemicals instruct mouse stem cells to become particular tissue types and how to insert the new tissues back into mice. Loren Field of Indiana University became so adept at signaling mouse stem cells to become mouse heart cells that "his lab is almost pulsating with heart cells beating in dishes," Gearhart says.

But, though the stem cell clearly dominates human germination, mysteries abound. The overriding enigma is why stem cells work so phenomenally well in the womb but then stop working when the body matures. After all, every cell in the body contains a complete DNA blueprint for a person's being. In theory, if your coronary arteries became clogged, your DNA could direct the creation of stem cells that would subdivide into new arteries to replace the failing tissue. In some lower animals that regrow limbs, this is roughly what happens. But, after reaching maturity, the human body never again draws on its DNA blueprints to replace tissue more complex than skin. Thomas Okarma, vice president for research for Geron, asks, "Who is really more highly evolved, the lizard that can grow new body parts, or us?" Using stem cells to make fresh new tissue or organs, as if the body was still nascent, is the revolutionary therapy Geron hopes to market.

Another mystery concerns the regulator that shuts stem-cell division off, called the telomere. Any human cell is capable of dividing roughly 50 times; after that, growth stops. Cells are born with a length of telomere, which gets slightly shorter each time the cell divides. When the last snippet is gone, after about 50 divisions, the cell can no longer duplicate. Running out of telomeres is one reason we age.

Why God or natural selection put telomeres into the cell is hotly debated among theorists. But, along with their other dizzying advances, stem-cell researchers have learned to rejuvenate the telomere, at least in the lab. Using an enzyme called telomerase, Geron scientists have already guided batches of stem cells through 200 divisions, with the descendant tissue being stable and nonmalignant. Researchers joke that cells that endlessly divide are "immortal," but this has always been a sardonic adjective, since the only immortal cells observed in natural biology are cancerous. Now Geron is making hale, normal cells that don't grow old, and wondering if this effect can be transferred to people. Therapeutic use of "immortal" cells would not confer unending life (even people who don't age could die in accidents, by violence and so on) but might dramatically extend the life span. Stem-cell research is spinning out so many breakthroughs so fast that its pursuit of the ageless cell, which in other contexts might be the scientific story of the century, here seems like just an asterisk.

The hope among stem-cell researchers is that practical treatments will be available in ten years or less. Biologists have been encouraged by the reasonable success of stem cells collected from the umbilical cords of newborns and used to treat conditions such as bone-marrow disease. (The sudden awareness that stem cells can be manipulated is causing crash programs to collect umbilical cords, which are rich in these enchanted cells.) But many things could go wrong between here and a new form of medicine. Loren Field's experiments with mouse hearts, for example, have shown that 97 percent of artificially cultured, stem-cell-based heart tissue works properly when transplanted into mice. But for reasons unknown, the other three percent becomes malignant. Obviously that problem has to be surmounted before human stem-cell trials can be contemplated.

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More pressing is resolving the basic ethics of stem-cell research. When Gearhart first proposed to use aborted fetuses as the basis of his stem-cell research, his sponsoring university was not thrilled. Although research on aborted fetuses is legal, it's a gray area, and restrictions are many. Occasionally, a maverick researcher protests this situation by asking the discomfiting post-*Roe* question: If it's okay to terminate a fetus, why isn't it okay to experiment on the remains? Few object to research on the cadavers of adults. Do we ban research on the aborted out of a sense of guilt that we should not add mutilation to the wrongs suffered by a life denied?

Gearhart's stem-cell extractions employ "fetal tissue," which researchers may view as differing from fetuses, though the reasoning is obscure. Johns Hopkins put his proposal through eleven levels of legal and ethical review, and also review by the university's security office, which worried that the degenerate fringe of the pro-life movement would target the project. Gearhart chose to focus on a type of stem cell called a "primordial germ cell," which he extracts from a region on the aborted fetus called the "urogenital ridge." Gearhart will work with fetuses no more than nine weeks old. Around nine weeks is when the fetus begins to appear recognizably human, though it is believed there is no consciousness until weeks later. He says, and not without defensiveness, "Remember, it's not criminal at this point." Technically, Gearhart's project might have qualified for federal funding, but he never asked, knowing there would be an outcry.

For his part, Thomson isolates stem cells from the "inner mass" of roughly week-old embryos that were conceived in IVF clinics but which couples elected not to use. Thomson thus extracts tissue from the early, pre-uterus stage in which it is impossible to tell which stem cells will become the placenta and which the person. Strictly speaking, then, Thomson has no way of knowing whether the cells he plucks could have grown or would have been lost anyway. Though Thomson's extractions are timed to occur at what seemed to him the least ethically perilous moment of incipient life, in the cockeyed world of bioethics regulation, his recent experiments clearly could not have qualified for federal funding, since he was employing embryos.

Both Gearhart and Thomson call on Congress to enact clear legal guidelines for their field. Thomson says, "The human embryo is the most special cell in biology, and there are just some things you shouldn't do to embryos"—mainly clone them. The primary point stem-cell researchers make in their own favor is that the cells they experiment upon, once brought into the lab, might be made into muscle or blood, but can no longer become a human being. This assertion seems true, though slightly cute, since the reason the cells cease being capable of personhood is that they've been artificially snatched from it. But then no one plans to conceive the IVF embryos that Thomson gets, and the fetuses Gearhart receives have already had their lives terminated. Neither biologist can change these things, though both might change others' lives for the better.

Reflecting the delicacy of the situation, stem-cell researchers are beginning to wrestle over the terms "totipotent" and "pluripotent." A totipotent cell is what exists at the earliest germination stage, when each stem cell is capable of becoming a whole person. A pluripotent tissue is an isolated stem cell, capable of transforming into any desired cell type, but not of becoming a whole person. Not, at least, with current technology.

In January, government lawyers sided with the pluripotent versus totipotent distinction, ruling that the NIH can begin funding stem-cell research on the grounds that the cells being worked with cannot become persons and thus are not embryos. This ruling hasn't yet taken effect; assuming it does, there will be beneficial results. Publicly funded scientists from research-center universities will jump into stem-cell investigations: research-center scientists are generally the country's best, and always the most accountable. Equally important, federal funding will move stem-cell findings into the public domain rather than allowing them to become proprietary. Geron shares samples of its stem cells with academics but asks the recipients to sign a statement that Geron owns the knowledge embodied in the cell line. Once public funding flows, proprietary claims will diminish.

Bringing public funding to stem-cell research will force a public debate on this new biology. There has been little so far. In Congress, a few members, such as Representative Jay Dickey of Arkansas, have declared themselves opposed, for pro-life reasons, to any research on embryonic cells. A few members, such as Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, have openly endorsed stem-cell studies. Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania was expected this year to introduce legislation making human stem-cell research explicitly legal, as it is in the United Kingdom. But Specter now says he will postpone action, feeling the time isn't right.

Many researchers were pleased by this decision, fearing that drawing public attention to today's stem-cell research might only provoke a backlash, whereas, once treatments derived from stem cells are available, lobbying impetus for the technology will be unstoppable. But, while the science world may be trusted to police its own for professionalism and high standards, it can't be trusted with the ethical end of this debate.

Science types tend to be unreflective boosters of funding, funding, and more funding. A 1994 NIH commission on whether to allow embryonic research endorsed it without meaningful objection, tossing off slighting remarks—like a statement that the human embryo is "significantly smaller than the period at the end of this sentence," as if that had anything to do with anything. Stem-cell research came over the horizon so fast that the 1994 panel's work quickly became obsolete, and now a National Bioethics Advisory Commission has

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been convened to study the latest developments. But it, too, seems mainly concerned with rationalizing the status quo. In January, I watched as the bioethics commissioners had a chance to grill Gearhart and Thomson. The commissioners were awestruck and deferential, asking what they could do to help win stem-cell funding—not much more aggressively than Dolly the cloned sheep herself might have. Toward the end, one commissioner, Rhetaugh Dumas of the University of Michigan, asked the sole unfriendly question: Does stem-cell research have any downsides? When neither of the scientists spoke, Dumas looked around at her fellow commissioners and asked skittishly, "Was that an inappropriate question?" It wasn't a reassuring moment.

One reason the interplay between science and religion has become a topic again is that thoughtful researchers know biotechnology is raising questions science can't answer. For one, whether stem-cell research is ethically good, bad, or indifferent depends largely on when life begins, and on this subject there is neither definitive science nor ethics. Many Catholic, evangelical, and Islamic theorists say that life begins at the moment sperm meets egg; therefore, a single cell can have sacred rights. But this seems not quite right, because DNA sets from egg and sperm do not immediately merge; the ovum divides once before the onset of genetic recombination. Besides, what would happen if cloning rendered every cell in the body a potential person? Varmus, the NIH director, has asked, "If we say any cell has the potential to be a human being, then every time you cut your finger, do you have to wear black?"

Obstetricians sometimes mark the big moment as the time, around two weeks after conception, when the fertilized egg implants in the womb and pregnancy begins. Thomas Aquinas taught that the fetus became "ensouled" after about six weeks. This view, which was Vatican policy until 1869, differs only somewhat from Gearhart's conclusion that fetal tissue extractions should stop after about nine weeks. *Roe* declared that the rights of life are in view when the fetus is capable of existing outside the mother, a milestone technology keeps pushing back toward the second trimester. Surely once brain activity begins, around the twenty-fifth week, the fetus has become human, leaving the late-term abortion a cause for moral abhorrence, except when the life of the mother is threatened. But, before that point, it's all speculation.

Consider that huge numbers of embryos die during the normal process of conception. As many as a third of pregnancies end in natural miscarriage, even with the best obstetric care. Studies increasingly show that it is surprisingly common, even in the absence of contraceptives, for eggs to be fertilized but never begin to divide, or to become embryos but never implant. Arthur Caplan, a bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania, considers it central to the stem-cell debate that "an embryo cannot in itself be considered a human life because as many as half of embryos never become babies." Perhaps it's true that the soul is bestowed at the instant of conception. But, if so, the divine is pitiless, denying a glimpse of the world to at least half of the souls so conceived. "It just can't be that every fertilized egg is a human life," one mother of three says. "Too many things go wrong for that."

Lee Silver, a Princeton University biologist, argues in the 1997 book *Remaking Eden* that what happens in the womb is a continuum, lacking any clear jump from cell cluster to sanctity: "There are no isolated moments along the way where you can point at an embryo or fetus and say that it is substantially different from the way it was a few minutes or even hours earlier." Silver notes that the fertilized egg can be frozen, apparently indefinitely, and asks in what sense a handful of cells motionless in liquid nitrogen can be considered alive, even if, for the sake of argument, the soul can be frozen, too.

Because the moral status of the early embryo is, at best, ambiguous, it seems likely society will decide that the first claim lies with those already alive, and permit further experimentation to generate stem cells. "We should respect every embryo," the bioethicist Caplan says, "but I'm not going to look at a person in a wheelchair and say, 'Sorry, you have to stay in that wheelchair for the rest of your life because of my belief that the frozen embryos in my liquid nitrogen might have become life.' " Thomson contends that stem-cell research is simply inevitable: "Even if we force it out of the United States and the European Union, it will still happen." Stem-cell medicine is coming, ready or not.

There is one possible avenue of escape from the moral enigmas of this research: if stem cells can be found in adults, there will be no need to draw on embryonic "resources." Biology textbooks call this quest hopeless, since by adulthood every cell is differentiated and incapable of further transformation. At least that was the view until February 1997, when the British researcher Ian Wilmut cloned Dolly. Essentially, he did this by taking cells from an adult lamb, making them act like stem cells, and then fusing their DNA into a donor egg which germinated into a baby lamb genetically identical to the adult. Mainstream biologists had thought that embryos, still rich in stem cells, might be cloned, but never adults—or that, if adult stem cells could be found, they would be incapable of reactivating. Since Dolly, however, cows and mice have been cloned from adult cells by variations on the Wilmut technique. Researchers are now finding indications that small amounts of stem cells continue to exist, overlooked, in the adult's nerve tissue and elsewhere; it may be that there are small adult stem-cell deposits throughout the body.

One biotech company, Advanced Cell Technology, claims it has already grown human stem cells by starting with adult tissue. The company says it removed the DNA from a skin cell of a man, inserted these genes into a cow's egg cell in such a way that the human DNA took over, and then watched as the cow egg dutifully

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produced human stem cells. Word of this procedure, mingling human and animal reproductive cells, caused President Clinton to say he was "deeply troubled" by the experiment—though, if the work was done as the company claims, the tissues created were human, since the human DNA had taken over.

Several experts dispute whether the experiment actually happened, and Advanced Cell Technology hasn't yet published the peer-reviewed data that back up a discovery claim. But whether or not stem cells have been made from an adult, some biologists are beginning to think this will happen eventually—"eventually," at the current pace of biotech advances, often meaning "next year." Stem cells derived from adults would not only resolve qualms about embryonic tissue; they might have superior therapeutic properties. Suppose you had a liver disease. If one of your own cells could be used as the template for fresh stem cells that would then be converted into liver tissue, what would end up transplanted into you would contain your own DNA and antigens, which presumably would forestall tissue rejection. Transplants might become something the typical person experienced several times in adulthood. Life expectancy would shoot upward, along with the health care share of GDP.

If any person's cells can be made into stem cells, gene therapy and gene engineering, hyped but so far very rare, might also become more common. For two decades, researchers such as W. French Anderson of the University of Southern California have labored to use genes to cure fatal childhood genetic conditions. It just hasn't worked. So far, the only way to deliver healthy DNA into patients is by using viral envelopes as little biological guided missiles. But the immune system shoots these missiles down, defeating the therapy. Anderson, a sainted physician who has spent most of his professional life seemingly inches shy of a great breakthrough, and who instead endlessly watched young patients die, has grown so frustrated he recently proposed attempting gene therapy within the womb. "Once the child is older, the cells may just be too developed to accept new genes," Anderson says—"older" in this sense meaning anyone who's been born.

In 1995, an NIH study panel called genetic therapy "a logical and natural progression in the application of fundamental biomedical science," which is certainly an engaging use of the term "natural." But there's no reason in principle to fear genetic theory, which simply represents using brainpower against medical problems that either God or evolution left for us to solve. And, if stem-cell research succeeds, the barriers against gene therapy may fall. Stem-cell based genetic therapy agents would contain the patient's own DNA code, with only the defective gene altered; the delivery vector would be not viruses but stem cells, which are designed to multiply like mad anyway. At the current rate of progress in research, stem-cell based gene therapy may not be far off, bringing cures to people now classified as incurable.

And once you're standing on this hill, it's pretty easy to see over to the next peak: genetic engineering. Technically, genetic therapy would be a form of genetic engineering—the purpose would be to engineer out the recessive gene that causes cystic fibrosis or sickle-cell anemia, replacing it with healthy DNA that does not. Yet the same technology that may make this gene manipulation possible might make possible the substitution of new genes for DNA that isn't diseased. "DNA engineering itself is now straightforward," says Austin Smith, a biologist at the University of Edinburgh, though only for plants and mice. Plant breeders have been recombining DNA for a decade now, famously inserting fish genes into tomatoes so that they resist frost better, while many of the specialized types of mice used in lab experiments have engineered traits.

Though no gene engineering has been attempted on humans, there appear to be no special technical barriers against doing so. Silver, the Princeton biologist, argues that our generation will be looked back on as "the point in history when human beings gained the power to seize control of their own evolutionary destiny." Control over evolution might turn out well or badly, but there's no reason to reject it out of hand, since evolution has left humanity disease-prone, short-lived, and fragile. Why shouldn't we try to change that?

The disturbing question is whether we will begin sooner than we think through the consequences. Currently, NIH protocols—but not legislation—ban any attempt to alter the human "germline," meaning to change genes in a way that would be passed along to offspring. Gene therapy attempts have been confined to "somatic" cells, the nonreproductive parts of the body, with anything else considered taboo. Yet, last year, Louise Markert of the Duke University Medical Center asked the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee, which supervises genetic experiments, to begin a debate on whether engineering of reproductive cells should be tested. It's not even the twenty-first century yet, and already earnest, respectable researchers are talking about altering human heredity.

Now back to that cow's egg experiment that may or may not have succeeded. Chromosomes from a grown person were fused into a donor egg, the egg began to germinate, and then stem cells were extracted. Suppose the stem cells hadn't been extracted. What might have developed might have been the embryo of a human clone.

Promising as stem-cell research is, what it's doing in the larger scheme is accumulating the technical information that will make human cloning possible. In principle, stem-cell technology might allow a clinic to isolate an adult's gene endowment, engineer it for frost resistance or God knows what else, and then, by allowing the new stem cells to reproduce themselves before implantation, clone unlimited facsimiles of the person.

It may be that the knowledge of cloning is unstoppable, in the sense that no force has ever incarcerated knowledge. And cloning should not be feared in and of

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itself, for there are arguments in its favor. Clones would be facsimiles of their parents (technically, parent) only in the physical sense. They'd be born as babies—no imaginable technology would create life directly as adults, making the business about rich men or dictators Xeroxing themselves a Hollywood silliness that detracts from the serious arguments against cloning. Character-shaping effects of each generation's particular upbringing would inevitably make the cloned child differ from the parent, while a clone's thoughts, personality, and experiences would reflect the unique human dignity possessed by every individual. No one argues that each member of a pair of identical twins, who are genetic duplicates, does not possess unique dignity.

Human cloning would also have the beneficial effect of providing the means for even the infertile person to conceive and raise a child, a blessing it is easy for the fertile to overlook. Thus we should not be squeamish about cloning merely because it mixes reproduction, technology, and the new. Leon R. Kass has argued in these pages (see "The Wisdom of Repugnance," TNR, June 2, 1997) that cloning is horrifying in part because it would make possible "the grotesqueness of conceiving a child as an exact replacement for another who has died." Aside from the fact that child B would not and could not be "an exact replacement," as both a parent and a churchgoer this possibility does not strike me as grotesque. If a child's life were cut short, the prospect that the lost child could leave behind a similar life, consoling the parents and preserving the memory of child A, might seem like a miracle.

When IVF techniques made their debut in 1979, pundits pronounced themselves repelled by "test tube" children, and polls showed the public strongly opposed. By 1994, at least 150,000 IVF babies had been born, brightening the lives of couples who would otherwise have been barren, while public support for IVF science had become widespread. Babies made possible through this technology aren't weird or abnormal, and they are less likely to suffer from gene-defect diseases, since their embryonic chromosomes are comparatively easy to check. The first American IVF child, Elizabeth Carr, just turned 17, and she wants to be a journalist. According to *The Boston Globe*, she attends an annual reunion of IVF children and delights in holding the latest in her lap. Can anyone believe the world would be a better place if the technology that caused Elizabeth Carr had been banned?

Every new life has an interest in being born, which was the clincher argument for IVF, and may someday be the clincher argument for cloning. Imagine meeting a cloned person and asking, "If you had been given the choice of either not existing or being conceived as a clone, which would you have chosen?"

Of course, it's possible the cloned person would turn the question around and say, "If *you* had been given the choice of either coming into existence as an unpredictable one of a kind or as a clone, which would *you* have chosen?" Perhaps there are some people with genetic defects who would say they'd rather have been cloned from someone with problem-free DNA, but most of us would say we'd rather have our gloriously unpremeditated forms. Cloning should produce physically healthy children—but what about mentally healthy ones? It's one thing to bear resemblance to a mother or father; most children take pride in that. It may be another to be born with expectations about you preformed—to miss the chance, as Kass has beautifully said, to arrive "an unbidden surprise, a gift to the world."

If a child could only be conceived through cloning because circumstances made it impossible for the parent to have progeny any other way, then the clone's interest in being born might outweigh the psychological risks. But what about the prospective mother or father who simply wants a mirror-image child, especially if the motive is vanity? In that case the chance of harmful psychological burdens on the child might argue against allowing cloning. It is this kind of imaginable-now issue, rather than science fiction about biotech dystopias, that ought to govern public debate on stem cells and the prospect of cloning.

Today's situation with stem cells and cloning might be likened to what would happen if a fleet of modern jet fighters were teleported back in time to ancient Sumeria. First, the ancients would marvel at the objects, noting their extraordinary complexity—as scientists marveled when they first glimpsed the extent of the double helix. Initially, they'd be too scared to touch, and some would argue that the gods would punish those who touched. Eventually, the fear would wane, and, by poking and prodding and pushing buttons, someone would manage to start one of the plane's engines, generating thunder and fire. At that point, the ancients would believe they had "discovered" the true purpose of the mysterious objects, and that, now being able to manipulate the planes, they had become masters of them.

Owing to the stem-cell breakthrough, there now stands the prospect that our children will not only live healthier lives but that their children will be the final generation of *Homo sapiens*, supplanted by *Homo geneticus* or whatever comes next. *Homo erectus* didn't last, so there's no reason to assume *Homo sapiens* won't ever give way to a next stage. If all goes well, the advent of control over our own cells might offer our grandchildren many things we would wish for them.

But it's all happening much, much faster than society understands. It's also happening under conditions in which we are telling ourselves that we understand genes because we have learned to make them do certain things, but we probably know little more about the totality of our DNA than would the ancient who doesn't even realize that airplanes are supposed to fly. It's time to move biotechnology to the center of the national debate, so that we can sort out its rights and wrongs before sheer technological momentum imposes an outcome upon us. •

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BOOKS & The Arts

Stanley Kauffmann on Films

"WE WANT BETTER FILMS!!!"

Above is the line that appeared—twice—on the cover of *Close Up* for November 1927. The magazine had begun publication four months earlier, the first serious journal about film in English. The editorial office was in Switzerland, the printer was French (the same one who had done *Ulysses*), two of the three editors were British, the third American. Kenneth Macpherson, a Scot, was an artist, a novelist, and, eventually, a filmmaker. His wife and co-editor was a historical novelist known by the pen name Bryher. Her real name was Annie Winifred Ellerman, daughter of a tycoon who was said to be the richest man in England after the king and who apparently subsidized the magazine. The third editor, who was also Bryher's lover, was the Imagist poet H.D.—Hilda Doolittle. *Close Up* appeared monthly for forty-two issues, until January 1931; then it became a quarterly because, the editors claimed, the arrival of sound had confined their readership to English-speaking countries. (They didn't explain how silent films had enabled people in other countries to read their English pages.) The quarterly quit in December 1933. No reason was given.

During its brief life *Close Up* attracted exceptional contributors and much admiration, not least from eminent film artists such as Eisenstein and Pabst. Now an anthology appears called **Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism** (Princeton University Press; 341 pp.; cloth $65, paper $19.95), generously illustrated. This book is overdue. The magazine's value has long been recognized. (I included two of its articles in an anthology of film criticism that I edited in 1972.) Now much of what distinguished the magazine can be held in your hand.

Like the original editors, the anthology's three editors are an international group. All three are teachers of film studies, James Donald in Australia, Anne Friedberg in America, Laura Marcus in England. Commendable work by all of them. Instead of merely selecting articles and running them chronologically, they have grouped the pieces into eight sections by topic—"Enthusiasms and Execrations," "From Silence to Sound," "Cinema and Psychoanalysis," and so on—and each section has an enlightening introduction by one of the editors. (Apropos of the psychoanalysis section: after *Close Up* finished, Bryher studied to become an analyst and H.D. was analyzed by Freud.) These introductions are given full endnotes, to which have been added biographical notes on all the contributors, a detailed table of contents for the magazine's entire run, and a time chart locating *Close Up* in the cultural flow of its time.

This leads to the book's subtitle. Film, whether viewed seriously or as popular entertainment, figured prominently in the lives and astonishments and writings of many modernist artists. (Joyce was actually in the film business for a while.) The book's editors state that they have placed special emphasis on the writings of H.D. and Dorothy Richardson (discussed below) "to pose the question whether *literary* modernism . . . should be seen in large part as a response to, and an appropriation of, the aesthetic possibilities opened up by *cinema*."

"In large part" might be questioned; in some part is unquestionable. An early sensitive response to Chaplin was Hart Crane's "Chaplinesque." Some of the first American film critics were poets: Vachel Lindsay, William Ellery Leonard, Carl Sandburg, Louise Bogan—and H.D. Not all modernist writers responded thus: Dorothy Richardson, suggesting contributors to Bryher, wrote: "You know Lawrence loathes films. *Foams* about them. I'm sure he'd foam for you." (He didn't.) But another anthology, of poems and excerpts from books written in the first third of this century, could easily be assembled to show the almost immediate effect of film on literature.

The topics covered in these *Close Up* articles range widely, both predictably and not. Among them are fulminations against cinematic trash, explorations of the avant-garde, anger at constricted film distribution, an ode to Garbo's beauty, rhapsodies about cinematic possibilities yet untapped. The transition to sound is of course discussed at length, pro and con. The famous visionary statement about sound by Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Alexandrov, first published in Leningrad, was translated for *Close Up*. A strong statement, "The Sound Film: The Salvation of Cinema," came from the magazine's Paris correspondent, Jean Lenauer. (Lenauer was last seen as the waiter in *My Dinner with André*, in 1981.) One surprise is the unusual attention paid to black filmmakers and actors, especially in "The Aframerican Cinema" by Harry Alan Potamkin. (The magazine started a corollary enterprise that published books and produced some films; in one of the latter Paul Robeson appeared.)

FILMS WORTH SEEING

The Children of Heaven. *Another Iranian meditation on the mysteries of childhood. A small brother and sister in Tehran and their difficulties about a pair of sneakers. (Reviewed 2/22/99)* **Dr. Akagi.** *Shohei Imamura, in his typical rough veristic style, follows a doctor in rural Japan during the last days of World War II. (2/8/99)* **Dry Cleaning.** *Unconventional sex upsets a provincial French married couple who thought their lives were settled. (2/15/99)* **Shakespeare in Love.** *And how he—perhaps—wrote* Romeo and Juliet. *Fun.* (1/4&11/99)—**SK**

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Outstanding is the section of articles by Dorothy Richardson. Now nearly forgotten, this English author was once noted for *Pilgrimage*, a series of thirteen novels that pioneered in the use of interior monologue. Richardson's film writings, as presented here, form a small phenomenology of film. She writes on the musical accompaniment of silent films; on intertitles, which she calls captions ("The test of the caption is its relative invisibility. In the right place it is not seen as a caption"); a paean to the neighborhood movie theater ("the small local cinema that will remain reasonably in tune with the common feelings of common humanity"). This last connects with her warm response to "The Thoroughly Popular Film," in which she saw a resonant optimism: "the wedding bells, the reconciled family, the reclaiming of the waster, all these things are [those films'] artistic conventions, and the tribute of love paid to them by the many is a tribute to their unconscious certainty that life is ultimately good." Richardson's little poems on the dailiness of moviegoing are a charming contrast to the aesthetic ambitions of much of *Close Up*; and her optimism provides something more than an ironic contrast to the last piece in the anthology—a report by Bryher, just returned from Berlin in June 1933, on the advent of Hitler.

The subtext of this anthology, or of any comparable anthology, is the ingrained conflict between a small portion of the film world and the major portion on which the film world depends for income. This is a conflict that will never be resolved. In an insidious way, the struggle is part of film's vitality. (The occasional victories in this struggle are what some of us breathe for.) Subsidy helps—in virtually every filmmaking country except the United States—but it can't cure the basic disparity between the tastes of a minority and the technological expense that relies on response by the majority.

This anthology includes a letter from Pabst in which he proposes a scheme to reach and satisfy the ten percent of the film audience that he thinks would support superior films. "Somehow," he says, *Close Up* must reach that minority. "Somehow" is not made quite clear. Yet the demand for consistently "better films" persists, even if not quite as imperious as it was seventy years ago. Meanwhile—a rather long meanwhile, I'd guess—thanks for a book full of wistful yet heartening antecedents. •

The Content of His Character

By Shelby Steele

Flying Home and Other Stories by Ralph Ellison

(Random House, 173 pp., $23)

I.

In an adolescence of much reading in the black writers of the day, I did not read the work of Ralph Ellison. This was the early '60s, the civil rights era, and James Baldwin was the black writer of the moment. And there was still Richard Wright, and then there were new writers such as Loraine Hansberry and the hip Leroi Jones. You could get right into these writers. They articulated an easy and inevitable militancy; and against the backdrop of the Freedom Movement, such militancy suddenly seemed the point of black life in America. In Baldwin especially there was an open and bristling disdain for American society that he filtered through his famous King James prose into a kind of beautiful outrage. But Ellison was more a literary militant than a racial one, and in his work there was an intellectual challenge that intimidated. Even the prologue to *Invisible Man* was daunting, with its architecture of symbols, themes, and allusions. And now that a collection of his apprentice stories, *Flying Home*, has been posthumously released, it seems clear that for many he still represents the wrong kind of militancy.

There were really only a few short years in the late '50s—before Baldwin's ascension as the literary voice of civil rights—in which Ellison's extraordinary gifts gave him preeminence. Since then his work has had a star-crossed career. Ellison was a black American writer who wrote what is frequently regarded as the greatest American novel of the twentieth century. Also, his two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory* (republished by the Modern

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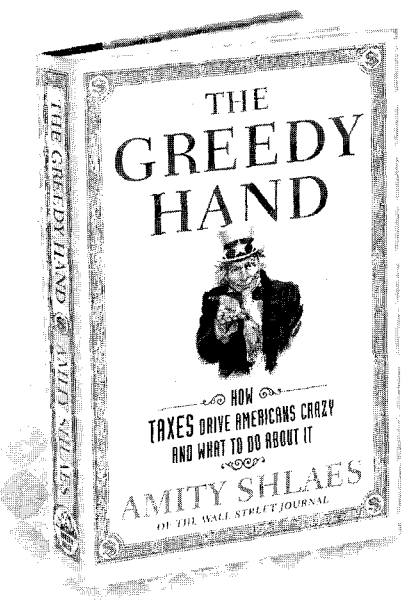

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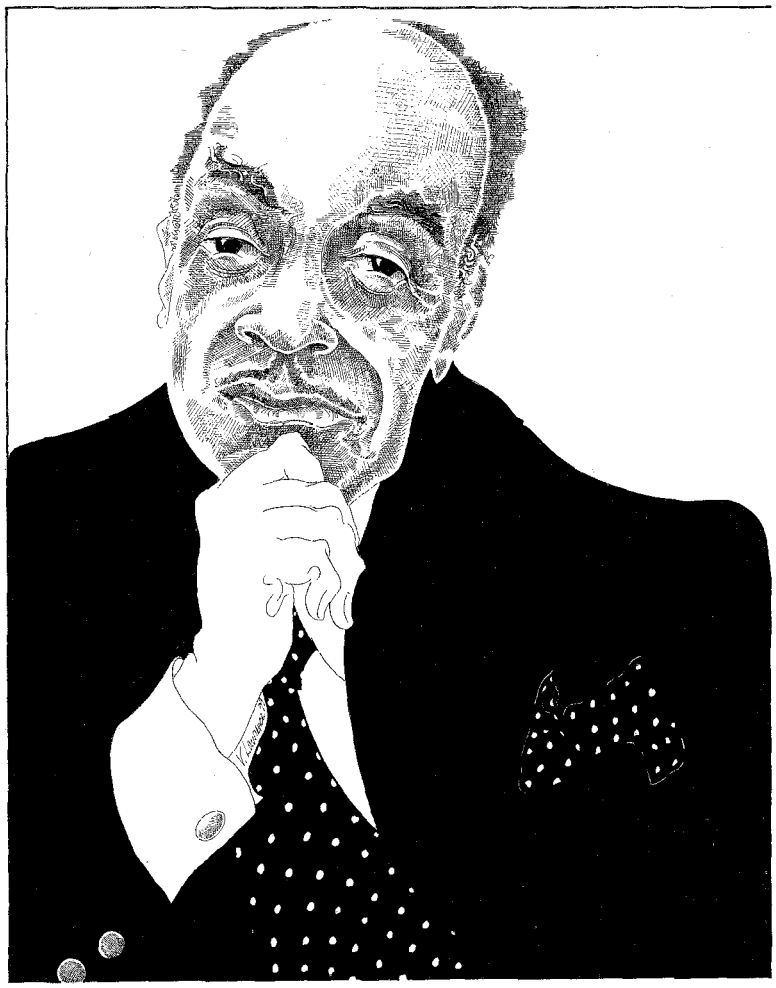
Library a few years ago, along with previously unpublished non-fiction, as his *Collected Essays*), are the most penetrating essays ever written on the relationship between black American culture and the broader American identity. And yet a black student at Oberlin College in 1969 told him, "You don't have anything to tell us." A critic named Clifford Mason complained in the late '60s about "the obsequious bleatings of white appeasement that have characterized Ellison's politics." And a professor at a campus in Iowa wrote, after hearing Ellison speak, that "Ellison's language and approach, I fear, attach to him the stigma of the bourgeois and conservatism."

Of course, such disjunctions between great writers and the people from whom they spring are common in history—so common, indeed, that we have a contravening prejudice against glib writers who find easy popularity in their own time. Even today, there are prison cells around the world occupied by writers who have somehow threatened a politics or a religion that their people or their leaders feel served by. And very often it is the spurned writer who wins the debate in the long run. So the hostility of many blacks toward Ellison is unexceptional in itself; and if history is any indication, the future will likely belong more to Ellison than to his accusers.

The rub between writer and group usually follows from the writer's determination to reflect on truths that are inexpedient for the group. In fact, what the group least wants to understand may be precisely what most excites a good writer—not because he or she is contrarian, but because unacknowledged truth is the natural territory of literature. But groups want power more than understanding.

They want "truth" first of all as a narrative that licenses the pursuit of power and advantage in relation to other groups. And they want this licensing "truth" to be so self-evident, so reduced to reflex, that the advantage of the group can seem like a part of the natural order. Black inferiority was a white group "truth" that licensed white advantage by asserting itself as a part of the natural order. Today the intractability of white racism is a black group "truth" that licenses the pursuit of special preferences for blacks.

So I read *Invisible Man* in the late '60s a little on the sly. The narrative of group "truth" for my age group was *Soul on Ice*, in which Eldridge Cleaver denounced even James Baldwin as a black sycophant. The literary Ellison did not even warrant consideration. And yet, at the very moment when he was deemed most irrelevant to the group, his work brought me the fullest understanding that I was ever given of the black world around me.



RALPH ELLISON BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

By the late '60s, black group truth was almost entirely focused on race as a force in its own right. Blacks had been victimized for many terrible centuries, and suddenly "blackness" was a color of redress and revolution. Yet this was an unsatisfying group truth, because it was merely strategic: a limited truth worn as a mask of advantage with whites. We did not understand ourselves so much as we memorized ourselves in the flat, sociological terms that gave us an appeal to white guilt.

But Ralph Ellison started from what was then, and remains today, a genuinely radical premise: that the genius of blacks, and of black culture, was not in the race, but in the human beings who bore the race. For Ellison, the story of black America was not a black story but a human story, another version of the timeless human story. And the fate of being black in America was a human fate. Race was simply an idea in another group's narrative of power, a false idea of a color-coded superiority and inferiority that set up the unique fate of black Americans—a fate that would be entirely handled by the *human* resources of intelligence, guile, imagination, and courage. As Ellison wrote, "blood and skin do not think."

As I say, one had to appreciate such an approach on the sly. The race-focused group truth of the late '60s much preferred traditional protest fiction, which emphasizes the dehumanization of blacks in order to highlight and to protest their oppression. The all-important goal of protest writing is to engage white American obligation. Thus, there is a perfect wedding of purpose between the victim-focused group truth and protest fiction. When James Baldwin gave up searching fictional explorations of black life such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* for straight-ahead protest such as *Another Country*, he became a "group" spokesman almost on a par with Martin Luther King.

Protest writing negatively differentiates blacks from "normal" non-oppressed humanity, and then asserts that racial oppression is responsible for the difference. In a protest novel such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a young slave mother drowns her own small child because white oppressiveness is deemed so implacable that death is the only safe place for the child. "She had to be safe and I put her where she would be." The "inhuman" act that differentiates this oppressed mother from non-oppressed mothers is entirely attributable to racial suffering. For this reason, the murder of the child is more a measure of white evil than of anything else.

In protest fiction, this differentiation of blacks from humanity, this *auto-*

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dehumanization, is all-important, because it is what stirs white obligation, which is the ultimate objective of all black protest writing. So this literature projects images of the black as defeated, angry, self-destructive, unrequited, and helpless—always and forever unequal to the forces aligned against him. From Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Rufus in James Baldwin's *Another Country*, and the black man in Leroi Jones's *The Dutchman*, and Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and from countless other characters in countless works comes this essentialization of blackness into the color of rage, helplessness, and oppression-imposed inferiority.

In truth, black inferiority is the substance of the all-important differentiation, for which whites, of course, are responsible. And this sets up the great paradox of protest writing: black inferiority becomes the argument for black equality, black inhumanity the argument for black humanity. (James Baldwin makes a similar point in his famous essay "Everybody's Protest Novel.") In protest writing, there is an inadvertent racial essentialism, and it takes the form of black inferiority.

Is protest writing invalid, then? No, but its logic forces a sacrifice of black humanity to the protest against black oppression. Thus it was possible for me in the early '60s to read one protest novel after another and to learn virtually nothing about the extraordinary and complex culture that blacks have created in America. Worse, there was a sharp disconnection between the defeated and frustrated characters about whom I read and the people whom I knew in my family and my community. If there were people around as witless and lost as Bigger or Rufus—and there have always been desperate people—they were certainly marginal people. Their story was certainly not the group story.

Since this literature was written above all else to trigger white obligation, it could not examine the strengths of black culture without putting that obligation at risk. A chief characteristic of black protest writing, therefore, is the concealment of black culture and black ingenuity so as not to diffuse white obligation. Thus Morrison's Sethe, Wright's Bigger, and so many other protest characters wrestle with their problems in cultural voids, isolated even within their own communities, unenlightened and unbuoyed by the traditions of their own group. No music or religion or storytelling consoles them. They have learned no cunning, no wit. By its concealment of black culture, protest writing actually implies that this culture is unsustaining of blacks—this despite the fact that its very emphasis on the power of white oppression makes it clear that blacks would have had little other than their own culture and their own ingenuity to sustain them for over three centuries.

In schools and universities across the country, these cultureless treatments of black life are routinely assigned to young readers in the name of black culture. Since multiculturalism is itself more a protest politics than a study of culture, it blurs the line between politics and culture, sneaking the former in under the auspices of the latter. The multiculturalist also has white obligation as his first goal. So, on the university level, *Beloved*, probably the most frequently assigned novel by a black writer in the '90s, is usually presented under the auspices of black culture, when in fact it is a rather cultureless protest novel. (This is not the case with other novels by Morrison, such as *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*.)

The larger point is that black protest writing perfectly echoes the post-'60s "group truth" of black America. For the group narrative of black life that informs black American politics is also organized and communicated as a protest narrative. Since the 1960s, black leadership has also concealed the human resilience and the cultural resourcefulness of blacks, as well as the full range of our new freedom, so as to highlight the black victimization that stimulates the sense of white obligation. In the story told by this leadership, black Americans are always unequal to the forces aligned against them. Whether inner-city school children or black corporate executives, success and equality are always shown to turn on the variable of white will.

The great irony of protest writing, then, is that it finds popularity with the group precisely because it conceals the group's strength. This writing and this politics make the same sacrifice for the same goal: black humanity for the possibility of white rescue.

Now consider the following episode from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The novel's young and nameless protagonist turns down an unfamiliar road while he is out chauffeuring Mr. Norton, a wealthy white benefactor to his small black college in the Deep South, sometime around 1939. On the symbolic level, this "wrong turn" takes them behind the mask of upright black striving that the black college officials project for philanthropists and into an uncensored realm of black life, a heart of darkness where the over-protected Mr. Norton glimpses chaos. And there they come upon the shack of the sharecropper Jim Trueblood.

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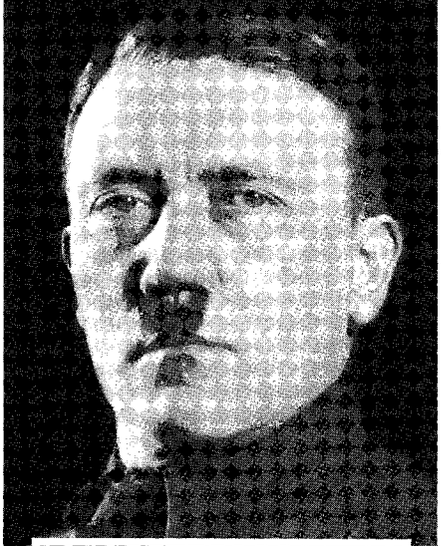

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To the mortification of all the respectable blacks "up at the college," Trueblood has impregnated both his wife and his daughter. Mr. Norton, who has just described his own daughter as "a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet," demands that the invisible man stop the car. "I must talk with him," he says, without the slightest trace of self-recognition.

Trueblood is well practiced in telling the story of the cold night in which he, his wife, and his eldest daughter slept together for warmth, and how he had a dream involving a white woman (another taboo), and how one subliminal confusion led to another until he awoke to find himself beside his snoring wife having intercourse with his daughter. When the wife wakes up to this sight, Trueblood recounts, she screams "like a woman who was watchin' a team of wild horses run down her baby chile." After hitting him with every object that comes to hand, she finally retrieves an axe that he has coincidentally sharpened only days before. In the instant that she brings it down, splitting open his face, he has the forbidden orgasm that puts his daughter in the same "family way" as his axe-wielding wife.

As Trueblood sits on his front porch telling this story to a mesmerized Mr. Norton—while wife and daughter in "far gone" pregnancy hide behind the shack—he seems to be a figure of great pathos. And yet we suspect from the beginning of his recitation that Trueblood is more than he seems. His entire family is wearing new clothes, and he is sporting a new pair of tan shoes, all purchased with money given to him by whites who have heard his story. By the time he tells the story to Mr. Norton, it has been refined into a finely crafted and perfectly structured narrative in which the climax literally comes at the climax. And quite predictably, Mr. Norton hands Trueblood a crisp one hundred dollar bill when he is finished, a considerable sum for a sharecropper during the Depression.

Slowly it becomes clear that the entire episode is framed by an irony. The white man with great wealth and power is not the one in charge of the encounter; it is the unschooled and morally fallen black sharecropper who is in charge. On one level, Trueblood is a metaphor for black America, both in the absurdity of his predicament and in the ingenuity with which he handles it. As he tells his story to Norton, he is masking. He is presenting himself based on a calculation of his own self-interest against his judgment of Norton. His carriage, the hospitality that he shows, and the arrangement of his story: all are elements of the mask that he constructs to get what he wants.

Masking is a method that virtually all subordinates use to offset the difference in power between themselves and their superiors. Trueblood was not lying to Norton so much as giving his story the form that would be most effective with white men. He knew they wanted most of all to hear about "the girl," his daughter, so there were plenty of descriptions of her. He seemed to know that the detail of his split face, however disturbing, showed him as something of a penitent who had paid at least some price for his sin. Yet he had to be nuanced enough in all this telling not to show his hand. The mask cannot be visible as a mask. And so Trueblood's narrative more than equalized the power between himself and Norton. For a brief moment, the hierarchy of white supremacy and black inferiority was reversed.

But given the depths of Trueblood's fall, a fall beyond the last taboo itself, there had to have been a nadir before he was able find the ingenuity of masking, a point where no consolation or transcendence would have seemed possible. Such a point came when the preacher whom he went to see told him that he was "the most wicked man he's ever seen," and cast him "out of his house." Again symbolizing the black American fate, Trueblood had come to the end of meaning, to a dimension of existence beyond even the reach of religion. Utterly alone, he had to find his own route to consolation, one that involved no catechisms and that required no approval from others. He found this in the blues.

> Finally, one night, way early in the mornin', I looks up and sees the stars and starts singin'. I don't mean to, I didn't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I *ends up* singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen. I made up my mind I was goin' back home and face Kate [his wife]; yeah, and face Matty Lou too.

In probably the best definition of the blues ever given, Ellison remarks:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger the jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolations of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.

It is the blues, then, that finally gives Trueblood a little "coherence and release," to use a phrase of Baldwin's. If he starts with a "church song," he "*ends up* singin' the blues." And this blues look at his own culpability in the wreckage of his life is so unsparing that his situation becomes both comic and tragic, equal parts of both. And in this way it also becomes a little impersonal, a little distant, a part of the world's folly. Now there is a small space between himself and the pain, enough for him to see that "I ain't nobody but myself." This affirmation is a kind of rebirth. In accepting the worst in himself, Trueblood is entitled to reclaim the best. If he is "wicked," he is also honorable enough to go back home and face his wife and his daughter. "I'm a man and a man don't leave his family."

Jim Trueblood is nothing if not an extremely resourceful human being; and a great part of this resourcefulness may be located in the strategies, the adaptations, and the forms of transcendence that come to him from his culture. If he finds himself alone, he does not find himself isolated. He is in his culture, his culture is in him. Its resources are his resources. It was the genius of Ellison as a writer to make dramatic fiction out of this conjunction of character and culture.

It has always been the special burden of the black writer in America (and other minority writers as well) to make his or her "invisible" culture recognizable in human terms as well as to tell engaging stories. Ellison, too, did this; but in his fiction the culture itself was also an actor, a force upon which the drama turns. The blues brought Trueblood a rebirth; and masking enabled him to bring a little profit to tragedy.

Ellison's genius in this regard has been quite subversive of his group's protest narrative in both writing and politics. Characters such as Jim Trueblood, or the vet at the Golden Day tavern, or the black college president Dr. Bledsoe, are not merely defeated inferiors who trigger white obligation. Indeed, it is their very lack of inferiority that makes them subversive. And if we follow the Ellisonian view of things, it is clear that "protest" itself—whether in writing or politics—is itself a mask that is maintained by the concealment of human and cultural resourcefulness in blacks.

And it has always been a code of honor in black life that you do not betray another black's mask with the white man. To the contrary, you help him "keep his game tight." In *Invisible Man*, Dr. Bledsoe is shocked to discover that the young invisible man doesn't seem to know this code, that he was dumb enough to let Norton meet Trueblood and thus see behind the black college's mask. The invisible man lamely protests that he

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ent down Trueblood's road because orton had asked him to and that he vas only trying to please him." "*Please* m?" bellows Bledsoe. "And here you e a junior in college! Why the dumbest ack bastard in the cotton patch knows e only way to please a white man is to ll him a lie!"

The ultimate irony here is that Elli-n, in making all these subtleties of cul-re clear to the world, is not "telling lie." He has let the world see behind e black mask, and so he has drawn the : of the modern-day Bledsoes of his oup. And they make the same point to m that Bledsoe made to the invisible an: that their focus on culture is really focus on power; that their enterprise really about territories within institu-ns, preferences in competition, claims resources, and entitlements. When ison celebrates the resourcefulness d the ingenuity of black culture, he lows the game" of his group leaders revealing that which undermines e mask. And they have pretty much ated Ellison the way Bledsoe treated e invisible man. They have given him a ony letter of recommendation to the ite world that says, in effect, "keep this gger running."

II.

All of this points to the existence of two conflicting views on the nature of black oppression in Amer-, each with its own politics and its own rary forms. In the protest tradition, ial oppression is always cast as an pression of absolute determinisms which the victim is left no "margin freedom" for the exercise of his will. ger Thomas murders a white girl cause the racist society has so imbued n with a fear of being found alone h a white female that his own instinct survival leads him to kill her, virtually reflex. Racism so determines Bigger's that his will is irrelevant.

n protest, determinisms are always ictural. Racist attitudes generate ial structures that impersonally cut the freedom and the will of blacks n in the absence of a visible oppres-In politics, for example, white flight ses an inequality of resources to er-city schools, which in turn dimin-s the scholastic performance of er-city black children. It is this struc-l determinism that allows the pro-movement, in literature and in life, ocate the source of black difficulties white attitudes. And thus to trigger e obligation.

here is nothing in Ellison's work to gest that he would have disagreed the idea that white racism could spawn determinisms that were oppressive to blacks; but the entire body of his work suggests that he did not see these determinisms as absolute. And though Ellison never stated it, this all-important qualification implies an entirely different theory of racial oppression.

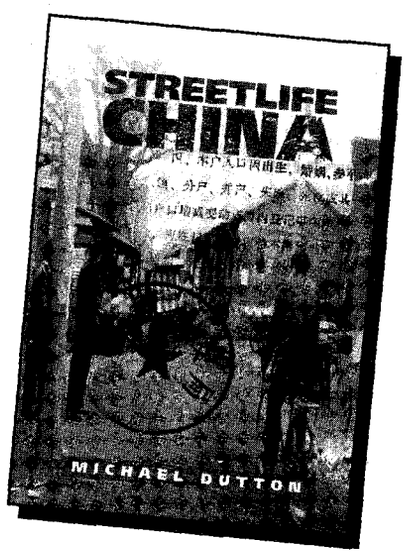
Ellison argued over and over, in his essays and his interviews, that even in slavery—a severe form of structural determinism if ever there was one—there was always some "margin of freedom" in which the individual could be effective in shaping his life. Thus, in one interview, he wondered about the black cabinetmakers who manufactured the beautiful cabinetry at Jefferson's Monticello. They had to have discovered a margin of freedom in which to become cabinetmakers rather than field hands. And whatever we may think today about the narrowness of that margin, it was broad enough to allow their own will to be effective in shaping their lives.

Inner freedom and individual will have always been elements of the black American experience. This does not mitigate the horrors of slavery and segregation, obviously. It suggests only that black oppression in America was not an experience of absolute determinisms. When there is a margin of freedom in which the will can be at least somewhat effective, a determinism becomes a contingency. The victim's own agency plays a role in his fate. His human needs and desires are contingent on appeasing or working around or compromising with some racist imperative, manifesting his humanity through subterfuges and subversions, elaborate masks, a keen alertness to possibility and opportunity, a talent for self-invention and improvisation, and very often through those small expressions of courage and dignity that constitute acts of rebellion. Indeed, the survival of an oppressed man may require a greater application of will and intelligence than would be required of a free man.

Black writers such as W.E.B. DuBois and Richard Wright have spoken about the black man's "double consciousness." I think that this second level of consciousness, this awareness that there is always a second and often unspoken level of meaning in American life to which blacks will have to be accountable, comes from living with a second set of contingencies that are in fact racist imperatives. For this reason, the best metaphor for the true nature of black oppression in America is, I think, that it was always like living under some inhuman, capricious, intrusive, and fascistic bureaucracy. It was an oppression of absurd contingencies, not an oppression

Streetlife China

Michael Dutton



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of absolute determinisms.

Unless one understands black oppression in America as an oppression of absurd contingencies in which there was always a degree of freedom, it is impossible to appreciate the heroism and the genius of black American culture. And this was Ellison's ingenious secret door to black American life.

III.

Reading *Flying Home*, the posthumous collection of Ellison's earliest stories, one is immediately struck by the wariness, the self-possession, and the cool introspection of the characters that this young writer created. These characters are set upon by all forms of racism, and yet there is always an intelligence at work, a consciousness that quests for possibility and never surrenders its authority to assess meaning by its own terms. These are personalities wracked by absurd racist contingencies, but never entirely controlled by them. In many of the stories, the dramatic tension is owed precisely to the pressure of such contingencies to push the personality toward a submission to the alibi of inferiority.

The most representative story in this regard is "The Black Ball," in which a young black father, who is trying to return to school, supports himself and his four-year-old son as a building superintendent in a white building. The first racist contingency he faces is that whites have begun to demand jobs such as his, and already two blacks at buildings across the street have been replaced by whites. Then a white union organizer appears to offer him union protection. Even this offer of rescue, however, threatens to become a racist contingency. As he says to the organizer, "unions don't want Negro members."

The organizer tries to convince the young father that "things have changed" by showing him his grotesquely scarred hands, which he claims were burned by a group of whites "for saying a colored friend of mine was somewhere else on a day he was supposed to have raped a woman." But somehow the melodrama of these "fried hands" only worsens the sense of contingency for the father, since they put his emotions at odds with his sense of reality. They ask him to believe that all whites are not his enemies, that democracy and fairness are really possible.

The poignancy of this story lies in the contrast between the father's humble human needs—to raise his son and to complete his education—and the extremely difficult moral and social transformations upon which these elementary needs are contingent. A white father in these circumstances might be strapped for cash, but the second-rate job by which he fed his child would not depend on a racial reconciliation within the union movement, nor on his will to believe that burned hands promise brotherhood, nor on his wearing a mask of racial obsequiousness to please a racist employer, and so on. And his son's first experiences of human evil would not come to him because of the color of his skin.

To have even one's middle-class aspirations, as well as one's self-respect as a father, contingent upon something as primordial and intractable as one race: this is the impossible tension an anguish of the tale. Yet in the end th young father is not determined by it a He does not submit to inferiority, n does he give up his aspirations or b come driven by Bigger Thomas-sty determinisms into self-destruction. *I thinks.* As he drags out his garden ho at the end of the day, he moves beyo this mountain of racist contingenci to a sense of possibility. And, as is oft the case in Ellison's work, he looks f relief from racist contingencies in Am ica's idea of democratic brotherhoo Thus it is the "fried hands" that st "on my brain." Here was a tangible sac fice to the ideal of brotherhood. He therefore, was the evidence of possibili At the very end of the story, he chec his pocket to make sure that the uni man's card is still there.

"I Did Not Learn Their Names" another story in which democratic pos bility is a central theme. A young bla is hoboing his way to college during t Depression and befriends an elde white couple. They have lost their mon and must travel by boxcar to meet th son, who is being released from prison. this boxcar, everyone's poverty makes t contingencies of racism impossible enforce, and democracy prevails. Mo there is even a kind of role-reversal, which the black college boy is seen be more the ideal "son" than the wh convict son.

In "In a Strange Country," a mo troubling story with this same theme black merchant marine on shore leave Wales is hit in the eye and called a "n ger" by another American, but th finds himself overcome with patrioti when the Welshmen who rescue h perform the American national anth in his honor. To be a black American Ellison puts it, is to have a "comp fate." In a foreign country, this merch marine discovers, by way of a black e that his American identity is conting on his racial identity, but that this sa American identity is strong enough him to shed a tear at the sound of national anthem. He is not reduced his humiliation. He is something American) that something else he is black) denies to him. The working contingency are such that he is the th he cannot be.

IV.

To be alive, of course to live with any num of contingencies. Som them are fair, some of th are not fair. When success at someth depends on talent and hard work, contingency is fair. It is supported

Objective Fatigue

How wonderful to have something felt be fact, to be told you cannot
go on for one minute more, thinks the woman watching
the trees casting spotted shadows on the front lawn of the guesthouse.
Across the street a narrow-hipped nun slips inside a glass door—
the reflected clouds bounce on its surface for a moment, then stick,
looking halted there as if they were trying to follow her in.
The woman is trying not to look at the two naked girls on the balcony
next to hers who looked up when she first appeared, then lay
their heads back down. Only a woman. She could hear them think it
as they shifted. She squints at a square in the book on her lap,
studies the old diagram again: the hand is in a kind of harness,
immobilized so that only the middle finger works, lifting and
lowering a small triangular weight. Between finger and weight a stylus
copies the decreasing arcs onto paper. She likes imagining
the scientists setting their tiny traps for fatigue and lying in wait, likes
that only the hand is pictured; no face pantomimes what has just
been proven. Just once she would like to feel that certainty on her tongue,
to turn to someone and say this is what you have done.

MATTHEA HARVEY

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reason. When success depends on connections or favoritism, the contingency is less fair, and reason rebels. And when success depends on skin color, the contingency is not only unfair, it also subjects all who come under its sway to an experience of the absurd.

Racism is not only an injustice; it is also an absurdity. The experience of this particular contingency has added a historical and existential experience of the absurd to black American life. One of the means that black culture developed to deal with this experience of the absurd is the blues. By honestly naming the absurd squeeze of contingency, by laughing at its comic reality, one is able to reassert reason against the absurd. The blues singer is a creature of reason. The frank and precise description of the absurd, "fingering its jagged grain," is an exercise in keeping reason alive. This was always one of the primary goals of the blues.

In these apprentice stories, Ellison was not yet the virtuoso blues writer that he later became in *Invisible Man*. Still, in two of the collection's best stories, "King of the Bingo Game" and "Flying Home," giving a name to the absurd squeeze of contingency, naming it to the point of comedy, constitutes what might be called a blues resolution.

In "King of the Bingo Game," a young man who is hungry, and in need of money to get medical care for his sick wife, goes to a bingo game in the hope that chance itself will come to his rescue. The odds are not good, but at least chance is a fair contingency. The spinning wheel does not read color; and as it happens, fate looks kindly upon him, and he wins the opportunity to go up on stage and spin the wheel. On stage, with the button that turns the wheel in his hand, "he felt a profound sense of promise, as though he were about to be repaid for all the things he'd suffered all his life." In a sense, he hopes for a kind of justice, personally and racially, if only chance in its color-blindness will continue to smile. In the end, chance smiles.

But as the wheel stops at the winning double zero, and he smiles into "the justice" of the emcee's congratulatory smile, he does not see the emcee's "slow wink." Nor does he see where the blow comes from that knocks him out as the curtain descends. The fair contingency of fate had taken mercy on him and let him win, but he had failed to reckon with the unfair contingency of the white man and his determination to mock and to defeat black hope. And if this fall from illusion to reality was tragic, it was also comic for its presentation of a black hope high enough to beat chance but not high enough to beat race. Ellison invites the reader, like a blues audience, into "the inescapable conjunction of laughter and pain," where a "homeopathic laughter" is all that keeps reason alive.

The collection's final and most fully realized story, "Flying Home," also comes to a blues resolution, in which the absurd mounting of racist contingencies is eased—not overcome—by "blasts of hot, hysterical laughter." Yet this story is more important for its artful rendering of the book's controlling metaphor of flight, by which Ellison rather obviously intends to represent freedom. Birds and planes soar from the first story to the last, and even a few barnyard roosters enjoy a freedom from the weight of racist contingencies that is denied to blacks.

In "Flying Home," one of the famous Tuskegee Airmen crashes his plane in a white man's field. He is discovered by an old black man with the stereotypical name of Jefferson; and most of the story takes place as the two men wait for Jefferson's son to return with help. Todd, the young airman, is an earnest fellow whose life-long aspiration to fly also symbolizes an aspiration to racial freedom—to a life in which his fate is not contingent on the white man. He thinks of himself as "cut off" from old Jefferson "by age, by understanding, by sensibility, by technology." He is even disgusted by the way that Jefferson marvels at how he, a black man, can fly a plane. "Now, for him, any real appreciation lay with his white officers." When Jefferson asks him why he wants to fly, he thinks to himself "because it makes me less like you."

In crashing to the ground, however, Todd in effect becomes no different from the primitive and "ignorant" Jefferson. "The closer I spin toward the earth the blacker I become." And when Jefferson tries to take Todd's mind off the pain of his broken ankle by telling him a tall tale about a black angel made to fly with a harness, Todd feels that he is being humiliated. He shouts at Jefferson: "Can I help it because they [white officers] won't let us actually fly [in combat]? Maybe we are a bunch of buzzards ... but we can hope to be eagles, can't we? *Can't we?*"

But wise-fool Jefferson is only the messenger of humiliation. Todd has humiliated himself by "flying too high and too fast" like Icarus, by losing himself in the grandeur of his aspiration, by allowing himself to forget the unfair and racist contingencies with which he must live—"if the angle of thrust is too steep the plane goes into a spin." And so he

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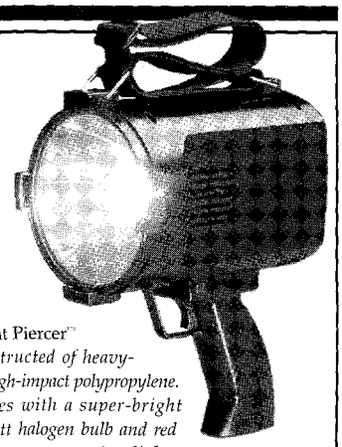

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crashes, falling from illusion to reality, as old Jefferson, in the book's clearest formulation of contingency, tells him: "You have to come by the white folks, too." This is what he had forgotten, that his life was contingent in this way, that he was not free. As if to further drive this point home, the white man on whose land he has crashed—in pure blues tragicomedy—has him put in a straitjacket as he is carried off the property. "You caint let the nigguh git up that high without his going crazy."

As in "King of the Bingo Game," the tragedy and the comedy are both in the self-delusion, the mistake of allowing even an understandable hopefulness to draw one away from reality. When Todd finally laughs wildly at himself, nothing external changes. Only inwardly does he feel "a certain relief." And then, finally, he understands Jefferson. No longer "cut off," he feels as though "he had been lifted out of his isolation, back into the world of men." Between them a "new current of communication flowed." All along it had been his own self-delusion that had stood between them. All blacks have to "come by" the white man: this contingency is their bond, the source of their mutual compassion, the basis of their brotherhood.

If this contingency is so immutable, why is it not a determinism? And why is this not a protest story? Well, the story certainly does protest. But it is not a protest story, because Todd is not internally defeated. Quite the contrary. He is reborn to himself and to his community. He does not lose himself to a racist determinism; he finds himself, and finds new resources within himself and his culture. He also does not give up his aspiration to fly, and nothing suggests that he will not fly again soon.

In Ellison's fiction, as in American life, white racism is an element of reality that must be faced, not an absolute determinism that transforms blacks into helpless victims. Todd crashes, and is humiliated; but he is not a victim. He is an initiate. He learns, grows, deepens. And when he is finally carried from the white man's field, straitjacket and all, he is rather heroic.

Initiation is Ralph Ellison's true theme. His characters begin in illusion or in innocence, and the reader is invited to follow them through many shocks, falls, and epiphanies toward an inevitable rebirth. This is always a drama of unfolding consciousness. For this reason, Ellison will always be popular with individuals and will never be popular with groups. For whatever mask the group wears, it will always generate a formulaic consciousness for its members, fictional or real. But Ellison writes about individuals, and so his problem with his group is as old as good writing itself.

SHELBY STEELE is the author most recently of *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (HarperCollins).

Reflections out of season on race, identity, and art.

"American Culture is of a Whole": From the Letters of Ralph Ellison

INTRODUCTION BY JOHN F. CALLAHAN

Ralph Ellison "had a calling, not a trade," Saul Bellow wrote shortly after Ellison's death, "and what we witness in *Invisible Man* is the discovery by an artist of his true subject matter." Acknowledged as a classic of American literature and world literature during his lifetime, *Invisible Man* secured Ellison's reputation as a novelist, just as *Shadow and Act* (1964) established his standing as a preeminent American man of letters, and *Going to the Territory* (1986) enhanced it. When he died in 1994, Ellison left behind also an extraordinary legacy of unpublished work, an oeuvre that nobody dreamed existed.

Of course, there were the manuscripts of his novel-in-progress—"*very* long in progress," Ellison joked in 1969, and still in progress at his death. Everyone knew of the novel's existence. No one knew—not even Mrs. Ellison, who kept the faith and the files for five decades—the extent of Ellison's unpublished work. But unpublished and uncollected essays were discovered in his papers, and they have been gathered (along with *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*) in his *Collected Essays*, which appeared in 1995. There were also early short stories, the best of which were recently published in *Flying Home and Other Stories*; and fragments of a novel from the late '30s and early '40s; and a novella; and a memoir.

And there were Ellison's letters. Written over six decades, his correspondence ranges from early letters to his mother, Mrs. Ida Bell, which were written when Ellison was at Tuskegee, between 1933 and 1936, to exchanges, in some cases over decades, with many of the central figures of American intellectual and literary life—with Romare Bearden, Saul Bellow, Kenneth Burke, Albert Murray, Robert Penn Warren, Richard Wright, Alfred Kazin, and Richard Wilbur. Equally important for what they reveal about his private self and his boyhood experience, there are also letters to old friends and relations from Oklahoma City. In the last years of his life, perhaps sensing that he might not live to write his autobiography, Ellison wrote more than a few letters that record in detail his memories of the people, the places, and the events of his early years in Oklahoma.

Ellison's correspondence tells his story on several levels. Biographically, the letters tell of his metamorphosis from an impressionable young man from the provinces into a man of the world by virtue of his fierce allegiance to his Oklahoma roots. Artistically, they tell of his evolution from an aspiring composer into a writer, then into a distinguished novelist, and then into a man of letters whose embrace of American complexity led him to a defiant patriotism bred of

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his need "to affirm while resisting." "Personally," he wrote to *Time* magazine in 1958, to correct its characterization of him as a Negro writer in exile, "I am too vindictively American, too full of hate for the hateful aspects of this country, and too possessed by the things I love here, to be too long away."

"There was a time," Ellison wrote to Richard Wright in 1953, "when I was more myself when writing a letter than at any other time." Whether writing down-and-out from New York to his mother in the '30s, to Richard Wright from Dayton, Ohio after his mother's early, painful, and avoidable death, or to old friends and new acquaintances in old age, Ellison comes across as a man utterly at home in his skin. The early correspondence reveals an artist emerging from the chrysalis—a young man not so much adrift as in transition. Ellison's letters to his mother in the late 1930s, after he left Tuskegee for New York, show him discovering Harlem and the great city with the eyes, ears, and nose of a writer. His earnest, unguarded sense of the injustice of poverty and racism in the new universe of New York releases a lyricism that leavens and deepens his protest.

Unsurprisingly, sometimes Ellison expresses himself with more candor in his letters than in his essays or his interviews. Writing to a certain Mrs. Turner about *Invisible Man* in 1953, he declares that "the writing of this particular book was an act of social responsibility as well as an attempt at an artistic projection." In 1970, not altogether patiently, he chides his "old friend and intellectual sparring partner" Stanley Edgar Hyman, instructing him that the frame of reference for the underground as the setting, the theme, and the metaphor in *Invisible Man* is far wider and different than that suggested by Wright's novella, *The Man Who Lived Underground*. "The point is that, like yourself, I existed in a *field* of influences, both personal and environmental; but despite this obvious fact you go on reducing the complex field to a single writer and implicitly to the *race* of that writer."

Wearing the mask of the intellectual, rather than that of the artist or the storyteller or the preacher, Ellison avowedly joins a long line of African Americans prepared to guide their countrymen through the labyrinth of American experience. "For didn't Mark Twain's Jim teach Huck of ethics?" he asks in a letter not included here. "And didn't Uncle Remus instruct the little boy in philosophy—or was it calculus?" In Ellison's case, "calculus" is a name for his repeated attempts to calculate subtle shifts in the fault lines of social hierarchy in America.

And, of course, the letters reveal the self-instruction that went on in Ellison's mind. To James Roark, a historian who had unearthed evidence that one William Ellison had been a black slaveholder and, it appeared, Ellison's ancestor in antebellum South Carolina, he wrote that "I was forced to conclude that whatever the facts turned out to be [in truth, the aforementioned William was not a blood relation], there was no more disgrace in one's being related by blood to a *black* slaveholder than to those who happened to have been designated 'white.'" But Ellison tempers his conclusion: "Nevertheless, the possibility that I might in fact be related to William Ellison left me uneasy, for as the saying goes, I had enough troubles of my own." His witty understatement underscores the painful point. Lord only knows what Ellison's militant attackers in the 1960s and '70s would have done with a family tree that had him great-grandfathered by a black slaveholder!

Ellison's letters show him generous to aspiring black (and white) writers and scholars, but he had a condition for his support: it was that "even home-boys must do their 'homework,'" as he wrote Robert O'Meally in 1989. Certainly the letters show Ellison paying his own dues to what he called the "very stern discipline" of the writer. Whether his subject is the weather in Manhattan or in the Berkshires where he spent summers; or the tense, expectant feel of Harlem on the day of a Joe Louis fight; or the look of rabbits in the woods surrounding Dayton; or the debt of Phillis Wheatley to Alexander Pope's neo-classical prosody; or the fledgling birds blown out of pecan trees on his grandfather's farm the first and last time he saw the formidable "Big Alfred" Ellison; or the impact of the Mississippi River on the form and techniques of Louis Armstrong and T.S. Eliot; or the hidden incongruities of a black man in his sixties with a rake (a professor incognito) passing a young black man in overalls (a student manqué) in a college town in western Massachusetts—whatever his theme, the epistolary Ellison finds original, humane, and witty meanings in his experience of the world around him.

The letters that follow express Ellison's views on the fraught matters of race and identity. On these urgent and delicate questions, Ellison's wisdom is distilled from his sense of the interrelatedness and the unpredictability of American life. The letters elaborate Ellison's profound conviction that because of its diversity, and not despite it, "American culture is of a whole." Firmly rejecting racial determinism, without ever denying the reality and the effects of racism, Ellison contended throughout his life that, to a significant extent, "each of us is responsible for his own fate." Yet his sense of individuality, though self-reliant and uncompromising like that of his namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson, was not complacent or self-satisfied. Nor did he regard his own fate in isolation: writing to Horace Porter in 1976, he pays homage to "those who endured and sacrificed to enable us to become better prepared for our continuing role in the struggle for freedom."

Ellison was proud of his identification as a Negro, as an Oklahoman, as an American, and as a writer. Over and over again, these remarkable letters insist upon his determination to create an identity greater than the sum of its parts. In 1954, in a moving letter to Morteza Sprague, the librarian at Tuskegee for whom he had worked in his student days, he remembers that he was reading *A Stillness at Appomattox* when *Brown* v. *Board of Education* was handed down by the Supreme Court. The decision, he writes, "made a heightening of emotion and a telescoping of perspective, yes, and a sense of the problems that lie ahead that left me wet-eyed. I could see the whole road stretched out and it got all mixed up with this book I'm trying to write and it left me twisted with joy and a sense of inadequacy." Ellison's tough introspection provokes him to a symbolic toast that might serve as epigraph for his life and his work, and for his exemplary concern for the fate of America: "here's to integration, the only integration that counts: that of the personality."

In the texts that follow, I have corrected typos and spellings, inserted missing punctuation marks, and from time to time used ellipses to indicate passages that I have omitted—passages in which Ellison apologizes for a delay in answering, discusses matters of family business, or passes on his good wishes; passages, in short, without the force or interest of the extraordinary miniature essays or narratives contained within so many of these precious documents. •

April 20, 1937

Dear Mama,

It seems the Spring has come to New York at last, and no one seems to object to its arrival, though for myself I feel it will be a very uncomfortable time. Closed up in a factory nine hours out of twenty-four is bad enough when there is the frost, the wind and rain outside, but to stand inside and look out at the ships sailing up the East river as it sparkles in the sunlight, and all the birds flying and birds singing, and with memories burn-

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ing in my head like melted lead, it's apt to be a hellish season. Sometimes I wish I had the nerve to go on and take a boat and go until I grow tired. Daddy no doubt felt the same way when he ran off to the army, and so did Langston.[1] I don't think it's lack of nerve that holds me back for I find myself fighting to stay put. Nor is it only in the Spring I feel these impulses, but in the dead of winter, at parties, when walking along the streets, early in the morning and in the dead of night. Especially in the night. Nights on which the skies remind me of southern moons which used to turn me soft inside. Sometimes I wonder if I shall ever grow out of this way of feeling about things. For so far there seems to be no hope. I had a long talk with Langston about it, in fact we had many talks and he tells me there is no use, and isn't even to be desired. He said he had the same trouble and was surprised to discover I was going through the same experiences. I suppose this has made us friends, all for which I am very glad. You see in spite of my confidence in desiring to become a musician, so many things happened in school and here that I've become a little bewildered. And the urge I feel within seems not to fade away but becomes more insistent for expression, and I have yet to discover just what form it will take. Let us hope I shall soon find myself. This state of things leaves me very worried and unhappy....

Try and answer soon and forgive me if I don't write as often as before because this job takes quite a bit from me. Nights find me asleep as soon as I enter my room.

Good bye and watch out for the spring fever.

Ralph

[1] Langston Hughes, whom Ellison met on 125th Street the morning after his arrival in New York from Tuskegee in July 1936.

•••

August 30, 1937

Dear Mama,

I haven't written because there really hasn't been anything new to write about. I am still living with Lang's aunt, but since her fall season has started I fear I'll have to find another place to stay. She is a very busy dressmaker, and people come in at all hours making my presence somewhat an inconvenience. They thought I would have had the job on the boat long before now, so I can't impose on them much longer. The job has failed to materialize due to the strike situation and I have no idea as to when it will. In the meantime I am trying to go on relief in order to get a job on the W.P.A. This has its own set of difficulties, the most important of which is to establish residence. I received your letter with the dollar which certainly was needed but you must not try to send me anything as long as you yourself are unable to work....

I am very disgusted with things as they are and the whole system in which we live. This system which offers a poor person practically nothing but work for a low wage from birth to death; and thousands of us are hungry half of our lives. I find myself wishing that the whole thing would explode so the world could start again from scratch. Now one must have an education in order to get most any job, yet they don't give us opportunities to go to school. Look at your own life. You've lived these years since Dad died toiling from morning to night, toiling and praying from morning to night. From Okla. City to Gary, to Okla., only there was no work in Gary, only prayer and those dimes with the holes which we filled with lead, then to McAlister where things were about as bad, and then back to Okla. City, and now it's Dayton. You've seen Herbert[1] and myself grow up, and neither of us has a job. All those years and all that work, and not even a job to bring a dollar a week. The people in Spain are fighting right now because of just this kind of thing, the people of Russia got tired of seeing the rich have everything and the poor nothing and now they are building a new system. I wish we could live there. And these rich bastards here are trying to take the W.P.A. away from us. They would deny a poor man the right to live in this country for which we have fought and died. You should see New York with its million of unemployed, the people who sleep in the parks and in doorways. The rich old women strolling down Fifth Avenue carrying their dogs which are better cared for than most human beings. Big cars and money to burn and right now I couldn't buy a hot dog. I'm sick thinking of the whole mess and I hope something happens to change it all.

It is rainy weather here and for the last few days the skies have been gray with mist falling whenever it isn't raining. The water lies in puddles and you have to pick your way if the soles of your shoes are not the best. The Fall is coming and the boys will soon be returning to school and I hope they leave a few jobs behind. I would like to be in a car riding up through Illo just now while the trees are beginning to turn deep red, and yellow, and purple and you can see the birds flying southward in the distance, soaring away, soaring away, and the apples on the trees, and the hay stacks in the fields. You can see the sun rise in the early morning blending the color of all this foliage into one sparkling mass of natural beauty with the dew upon it all. Sometimes you can see the harvesters already working in the fields and you think of the stories of the big meals they are supposed to serve and eat, and you visualize the big prize pies and home cooked breads, and sometimes you become hungry thinking about it all. Especially when you are hungry as I am now, I missed my lunch.

The city is no different in the Fall. The only change here is in the skies which on some days are grey and misty and rainy; and you wonder where the people who sleep in the parks will spend the long night to come, the cold nights to come, and if you'll have to join them.

The kids are now flying kites but they haven't started playing marbles. Those who can afford them are still wearing summer clothing and there is some talk and much talk of hope of buying new overcoats. Over the tops of flats and buildings you can see the kites sailing, and dipping, and rising like gulls riding the wind over a blue gulf, and you can hear the cries of the boys floating down, floating down to the street, like when you were around Look Out Mountain and you heard people climbing above you. On the streets are picket lines of people fighting for higher wages and shorter hours, and when you walk down some of the streets you wonder how some of the people are able to eat. If you walk down Eighth Avenue you can see the curb markets and fruit stores and sea food joints and if you come by around meal time when the poor people are eating you can smell the fish frying and the hog maws and home fries. On the stands you see plenty of tropical fruit: mangoes, guavas and plantains, melons and yams. And on the corners you can buy bananas and fresh fish from vendors of push carts. All the fruit and fruit smells and fruit colors become all mixed with smells of washed and unwashed bodies and perfume and hair grease and liquor and the bright and drab colors of dresses and overalls, and that which the dogs leave on the side-walk. I like to walk on such streets. Life on them is right out in the open and they make no pretence of being what they are not. The whore, the pimp, the ditch digger, the likker head, and the down-and-outer are all here trying to get along. It makes me very angry to think of the causes behind all the misery in the world, and the way it's all concentrated here in Harlem. I hope something happens to change it all.

Please let me hear from you soon, and you must remember not to worry about me. Tell me how your hip is doing and if you are able to walk.

Tonight's the night of the fight between Joe and Farr.[2] Already you can see

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the excitement rising and the police gathering. Just now a regiment of patrol passed all in blue and yellow-trimmed uniforms and you can hear the horses' feet going cloppity clop, cloppity clop on the asphalt sounding all out of place and the smacking whirr, smack, smack whirr of the rubber tires. Tonight there will be hundreds of cops in Harlem and much shouting of excited Negroes and most of the whites will stay out if Joe loses and if he wins, they'll come up to see the fun. I'll write of it later. So until next time——

Love
Ralph

[1] Ellison's younger brother Herbert, born 1917, died 1998.
[2] The boxers Joe Louis and Tommy Farr.

•••

October 27, 1937

Dear Dick,[1]

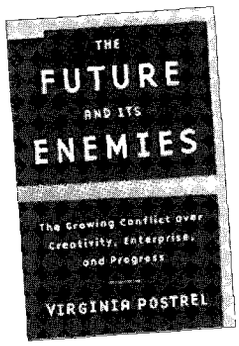
I have intended to write you for some time but most intentions are neglected in face of death. Even good ones.

I lost my mother the day after I arrived in Cinn. The funeral was over in a week's time and my brother and I are now here in Dayton transacting all final business. This is the end of childhood for both of us. I used to pretend this was so when I came to New York but now I know it was just pretence and nothing more. This is real, and the most final thing I've ever encountered. I feel very sorry for my brother as he has never been away from her before and though he tries to hide it he is hurt very much. We spend a lot of time at the movie here eating candy like we did quite a while ago and then go along the streets, that are very much like those of Oklahoma City, home. I say home because much from Okla. is here. Sometimes we kid each other but we avoid talking of certain things and I see that he spends much time away from me so as not to mention these painful things. It is terrible. He needs her very much and I am able to help so little. Too I know that as the pain which holds us becomes a little blunted the antagonism between us will come alive and then things will be very difficult to manage. We are so utterly different.

You must write and tell me of the magazine.[2] If possible I should like for you to send me copies. It might be that I can secure a few subs. I go down to Cinn. where my aunt lives and I might try there. There is no *Daily* nor *Masses*[3] to be had here, and I've only today discovered this very old typewriter. I spend most of my time in the woods which surround the town with a friend's young hound and a .22 rifle. Most of the time it is very cold in the woods and the rabbits stick very close to their beds making it very difficult to see them, so close do they merge into the fall scene. I walk along thinking, rifle ready, eyes supposedly looking for the cotton-tailed gents but lost in the color of leaves the variations and designs from which I've been away a long time, then suddenly the sound of fast falling feet and mister rabbit is laying tracks up the hill to beat hell and the bullets which usually I'm unable to send into him. I lack the discipline which enables the eyes to pick the small live black eyes of mister rabbit out of the leaves and grass which are so much like his coat, but in a week or so he'd better beware. And anyway the season will be open then. And I will be able to use a shotgun. But who knows, perhaps I'll be in New York by that time and someone else will bring these elusive dinners down to dust with metal sticks which roar and into flame do *bust.* (How's that? Me, Marvell, Eliot, Hemingway.)

Yesterday we picked a bushel of pears growing wild in the woods and Sunday we brought in two sacks, "gunny sacks" full of walnuts and fine full-flavored butter nuts, which are new to me, and which

"Read this wonderful book!"
—James K. Glassman, columnist, *The Washington Post*



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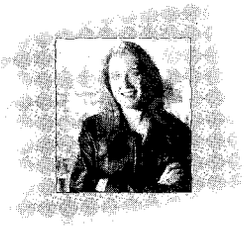

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I find very tasty. I don't hold Rousseau in very high regard but nature in fall dress is nice. You cannot say as in the Spring "Ain't Nature gland," but a belly full of apples, pears, and nuts is very swell, and no pun is intended.——What are you doing about the girl's girls?

Had to give up the type. If the syntax is bad, blame it on my mother's great-aunt who is near a hundred years old and who is trying to tell me of her childhood as I write. She spends most of these days there back in Va. and Georgia. Seems that I come from a line of niggers that liked to run off to the Yankees. I am unable to decide whether she approved or not. She's a fine old lady and quite spry despite the age. Just now she's telling me (for the fiftieth time) of my grandma who always spoke up to the white folks. Dick, I feel this a large enough dose of this for you this time, so try to answer soon.

Ralph

[1] Richard Wright, whom Ellison met and became fast friends with in July 1937.
[2] *New Challenge,* which had recently published Ellison's first review and to which, at Wright's urging, he submitted his first story, "Hymie's Bull."
[3] *Daily Worker* and *New Masses,* the leftist periodicals.

•••

August 25, 1947

Dear Kenneth:[1]

I was very disappointed to arrive at Bennington on your day of departure last June, for I had hoped to see you there. Especially, since until quite recently I've found it impossible to write letters—which explains why you haven't heard from me. I did manage to use the telephone and was thus able to keep in touch with Stanley,[2] but with you this wasn't possible; so I had to contend with my vain resolutions and bad conscience.

Since I've been here in the mountains I've written some seven letters in less than a week, so I suppose the psychological ice-jam has been broken. God knows it's been hot enough. But then, my novel has been going rather smoothly up here, and though the economic determinists would insist that it is because I've recently signed a new publisher's contract (having shifted from Reynal & Hitchcock to Random House) and am thus more serene in my gut life, I have a notion that the answer lies in the effect which the mountain has had upon my dream life. In Harlem I live out my horrors during the day; here I have my nightmares at night and by eight in the morning after watching the thick mist sweeping before the swift rising of the sun, I've achieved enough of a precarious tranquility to turn in a rather successful day of writing.

I suppose it's rather difficult when one lives in an apartment which one must enter through a long, narrow (and ofttimes smelly) hallway, into a small and low-ceilinged warm little room, to deal facilely with the cloacal and subterranean imagery with which I'm concerned in my book. For if art isn't life, neither is life art; and when your nose is bumped against your life too consistently and in too short an arch, there's no perspective in which the imagination can come to focus. I see no solution except to move. Or change my theme. Perhaps when upon mountains one should only write about holes; when in holes, only about mountain life. Think of what that might do for the imaginative quality of our literature.

What have you published recently? Just before leaving the city I hastily read your piece on Ideology and Myth and had it set off a few bells in my head. When I return I plan to give it a careful study, as it reawakens my interests in a piece I planned concerning the relations between our "science" of sociology and racial ideology. Myrdal's *American Dilemma,* for instance, is full of rhetoric and ideological manipulations.

As for myself, I've just corrected the proofs of a section of my novel[3] which is to appear in the American number of *Horizon* next October. It looks very strange in print, but it's too late to do anything about it. Connolly[4] was enthusiastic enough in his letter however, saying that he threw out two pieces to make space for it, and asking to be my English publisher. I only wish the damn thing was completely finished, agonized over, learned from, and forgotten in the enthusiasm for my next.

As ever,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Kenneth Burke.
[2] Stanley Edgar Hyman.
[3] Chapter One, the "battle royal" episode of *Invisible Man.*
[4] Cyril Connolly edited *Horizon* in London.

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March 31, 1953

Dear Mrs. Turner:[1]

Your letter came at a time when my book[2] was under a very irritating attack in one of the local Negro newspapers and it was reassuring, to say the least. I must say, however, that when I told the *Saturday Review* interviewer that there was more to invisibility than I had been able to get into the book, I, by no means, meant to imply that I would return to that theme, only that like any valid metaphor for an aspect of the human condition, it was impossible for one man to exhaust it. As for myself, I doubt if I have really been invisible myself. Certainly not in the dramatic sense that I have conjured up in my book.

I find, however, that many people assume that I am writing about myself and, indeed, one or two reviewers treated the book explicitly as autobiography. For me, the writing of this particular book was an act of social responsibility as well as an attempt at an artistic projection. Ironically, however, although my natural pace is that of the "walk," *Invisible Man* has had me running all over the place. Indeed, I was lecturing in North Carolina when your letter arrived—which reminds me that some of the Negro leaders in Greensboro, like the man in Baltimore, are so timid that they are not accepting as fast the new responsibilities of freedom as they might, which of course they rationalize as the sole fault of white people. Fortunately, this is not true of all. Evidently your friend feels, as many Negroes do, that the novel should be an elaborate way of putting the "race's" best foot forward and if left to us the agony of creation would be quite simple. One simply would portray Negro experience and Negro personality as the exact opposite of any stereotype set up by prejudiced whites. My work in attempting to define this particular aspect of personality only makes them afraid because it tries to reveal the extent to which each of us is responsible for his own fate....

Sincerely,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Mrs. Henry Dickinson Turner of Baltimore, Maryland.
[2] *Invisible Man.*

•••

May 19, 1954

M.D. Sprague[1]
Librarian
Tuskegee Institute

Dear Mort,

... Well so now the Court has found in our favor[2] and recognized our human psychological complexity and citizenship and another battle of the Civil War has been won. The rest is up to us and I'm very glad. The decision came while I was reading *A Stillness at Appomattox,* and a study of the Negro Freedman and it made a heightening of emotion and a telescoping of perspective, yes and a sense of the problems that lie ahead tha

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left me wet-eyed. I could see the whole road stretched out and it got all mixed up with this book[3] I'm trying to write and it left me twisted with joy and a sense of inadequacy. Why did I have to be a writer during a time when events sneer openly at your efforts, defying consciousness and form? Well, so now the judges have found and Negroes must be individuals and that is hopeful and good. What a wonderful world of possibilities are unfolded for the children! For me there is still the problem of making meaning out of the past and I guess I'm lucky I described Bledsoe before he was checked out. Now I'm writing about the evasion of identity which is another characteristically American problem which must be about to change. I hope so, it's giving me enough trouble. Anyway, here's to integration, the only integration that counts: that of the personality. See you soon.

Ralph Ellison

[1] Ellison was to dedicate *Shadow and Act* (1964) to Morteza Sprague, for whom he had worked in the Tuskegee Library, as "a dedicated dreamer in a land most strange."
[2] *Brown* v. *Board of Education*.
[3] Ellison was beginning his second novel; unfinished at his death, it will be published in June by Random House under the title *Juneteenth*.

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November 27, 1958

The Editor
Time

Dear Sir:

I was surprised to return from a hard afternoon of hunting the domestic cornfields around Tivoli, New York to learn from *Time*'s Alien Corn piece that I am allegedly self-exiled in Rome. May I inform you that your report is, to say the least, exaggerated? Actually, I returned to the U.S. a year and two months ago—not from voluntary exile, "for social and political purposes," as Richard Gibson's[1] rhetoric would have it, but from a stay at the American Academy in Rome; which was my privilege as winner of the 1955 Fellowship in Literature granted by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Admittedly, two years may seem a long time to be away from this swiftly changing country even for purposes of broadening one's personal culture—which is the aim of the fellowship—but exile is, fortunately, (and even for Negro Americans) largely a state of mind. As such I don't think it should be confused with the American's right to live wherever he wishes without having his feelings about his country put to question. Indeed, it is possible to live abroad for good reasons and to remain at home for bad ones.

My wife and I found living in Rome a wonderful experience and a welcome relief from the racial stresses of American life, but neither the artistic glories of its past nor the social felicities which were so generously extended us there got to us with quite the immediacy of the news that broke in Montgomery, Alabama.[2] Yet during my time in Europe I had more than one white American tourist assure me that he saw the stigmata of the exile on me and thus felt challenged to take a moral position toward my presence there. Some were apologetic, as though my presence in Europe was an accusation and a rejection of them personally. One or two reacted like a white Southerner trying to intimidate a Negro tenant who had packed up to try his luck in the North into remaining on the old plantation. And others felt compelled to give my assumed exile their rather hush-hush moral sanction. "If *I* were a Negro, I'd never go back to the States," they'd whisper. But in fact, my wife and I were so little concerned with thoughts of exile that we didn't even have our New York telephone disconnected.

On such matters as these, Gibson, whom I don't know, should speak for himself, for the issues which claim one's heart and intellect are most personal. Thus while I sympathize with those Negro Americans whose disgust with the racial absurdities of American life leads them to live elsewhere, my own needs, both as citizen and as artist, make the gesture of exile seem mere petulance. Nor do I find Negro Americans who exploit the racial tragedy of our people for the entertainment of the French any less odious than those professional white southern literary men who go about Europe preaching the high value of that segregated and stultifying South in which they've avoided living since the early 1920s; both protest too strongly. As writers I should think the question of where one lives would be secondary to the question of where one is most creative. Faulkner writes with great creativity in Mississippi; Hemingway and Henry James wrote well in Europe; Richard Wright wrote better in Chicago and Brooklyn than he has in Paris. Let the writer go where he works well and if he goes stale in one place let him try another. Personally I am too vindictively American, too full of hate for the hateful aspects of this country, and too possessed by the things I love here to be too long away....

Sincerely,
Ralph Ellison

[1] An expatriate African American novelist living in Paris.

[2] The Montgomery bus boycott began in December 1955.

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December 13, 1959

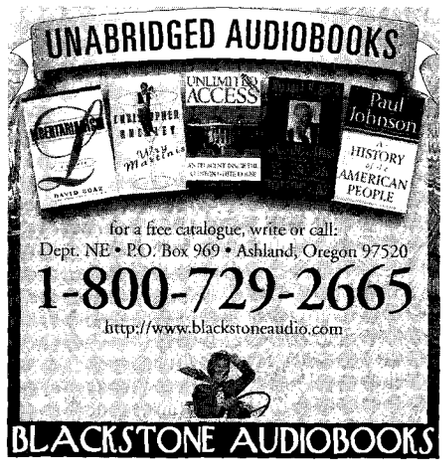
Dear Mr. Spiegel,[1]

I hope you have endured your ordeal and I apologize for taking so long to write.

I must say that your letter is perhaps the most interesting that I have received concerning the effect of *Invisible Man* upon a reader. And not only interesting but, at this distance, hilarious. What a situation! Mrs. Ella Pride, who seems bent upon living up to her name by making a nuisance of herself, and a preacher who wishes to out-Bledsoe Dr. Bledsoe. The only suggestion I can make, since it is impossible for me to confront the lady on her own grounds, is that you give careful consideration as to whether such people really should be introduced to education. I say this facetiously but the question is serious. I cannot ignore such people when I survey the world I know, but after I have written, I can only hope that they will understand and ignore them if they do not.

As for my racial identity, you may say to her that I am not only Negro but out of a Methodist home; that I did not intend to offend anyone, even her, but to present a picture of a certain phase of American life as I know it, with people speaking, thinking and acting in such manner as I know to be true. That if she believes that such people do not exist and that they do not exist even in Cheyenne, then her religion should take her out into the street and she should pray that her eyes be opened and that her ears be quickened and that she have the courage to face the truth and the understanding which comes of charity.

As for Reverend Campbell, I know too much about the inner workings of an



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Afro-Methodist-Episcopal church even to be annoyed with him. It isn't pleasant to be called a traitor even by a man I've never met, but he should be very careful since it is just possible that he wouldn't stand up too well under scrutiny. Indeed, I'm made curious by his recklessness and his lack of grace.

At any rate, if the book is censored in Cheyenne, I shall turn the matter over to the American Book Publishers Association, who are well skilled in putting such petty censors in their places.

Naturally I did not write the book to degrade anyone and certainly not my own group, which would be to degrade myself. Nor did I write it to falsify reality or to present the kind of picture which might please Mrs. Pride or the Reverend Campbell. I wrote it in an attempt to give meaningful form to a body of experience which is much more chaotic and complex and tragically human and real than most of the solutions that are offered to deal with it—including that proffered by narrow, ignorant clergymen. I believe the picture presented in *Invisible Man* is a true one and that its statement about human life transcends (and was meant to transcend) mere racial experience. That on the broader level of its meaning it says something about the experience of being an American and that this includes all Americans, white or black.

Thanks very much for your letter and I hope you won't allow the Ella Prides and Reverend Campbells of this world to dampen your enthusiasm for teaching.

Sincerely,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Mr. Sydney Spiegel of Cheyenne, Wyoming.

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May 18, 1964

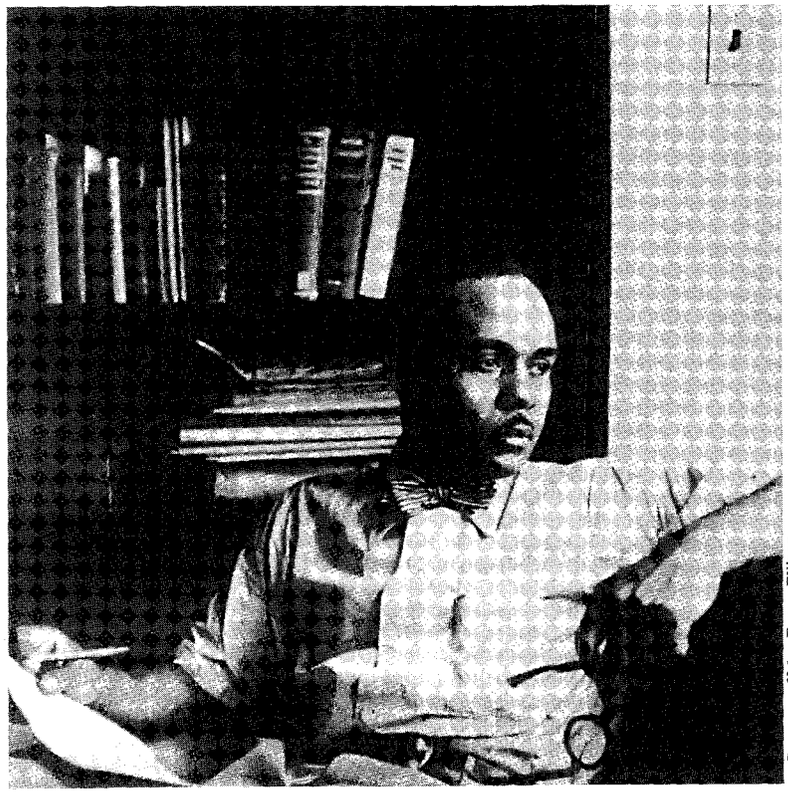
Bela Zempleny
Division for Americans Abroad
Department of State

Dear Mr. Zempleny:

I am afraid that my understanding of our discussion at Rutgers differs somewhat with yours. My intention was to think through the possibility of taking up your proposal, but I meant by no means definitely to commit myself. I am sorry for this misunderstanding. My interest was tentative and, after carefully considering my own complex circumstances, tentative it must, for the time being at least, remain. Since I felt, and feel, no great urgency to see the Soviet Union, the fact that I entertained the idea at all is testimony to your gifts of persuasion.

But not only am I, quite frankly, skeptical as to the value of the cultural exchange (though I have hopes that great good will come of it), I feel that I can best contribute to American culture, and thus to the nation's self-image and sense of reality, by remaining at home and completing a number of projects upon which I have been far too long at work. There is also the critical situation of my own special segment of the American people, who are facing, in the months to come, a most intense phase of their struggle. As one whose art depends upon observation and the conveyance of a "felt" sense of life, I feel that my proper place is here on the scene. Perhaps when my own work is under better control—and certainly this could only increase my value as a representative—and the situation here at home is less fluid, I shall be available....

Respectfully yours,
Ralph Ellison



Courtesy of Mrs. Fanny Ellison

RALPH ELLISON, CIRCA 1945

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May 29, 1970

Dear Stanley:[1]

Thanks for the encouraging words concerning the Bearden piece,[2] as you probably realize it is my first attempt at art criticism and I undertook it with fear and trembling. I hope you'll still find some of it valid once you've seen Bearden's work. There are several here in the apartment at which you and Phoebe are welcome to have a look-see whenever you're in New York. But now to remove a few of the needles you inserted with your kind words.

When we discussed your essay on Wright at the Mitchells' either *I* was drinking faster than you, or *you* were three sheets in the wind; therefore since both are possible let me hasten to say that if you thought that I was objecting to your using such terms as "Negro artists," "Negro American experience," etc., you were mistaken. My objection was to such generalizations as "There can be no doubt that Negro hatred of whites is close to universal." For if Negro hatred of whites were so universal such black militant writers as Jones[3] wouldn't have to go to such frenzied lengths in their efforts to arouse that hatred. I also objected because I believe that you make our Negro American attitudes and emotions toward whites far too simple. You allow us no contempt—a quite different emotion than hate—no irony, no forbearance, no indifference, no charity, no mockery, no compassion, no condescension—not to mention that ambivalence of emotion and attitude which you so readily see in the Blues.

As I see it, Negro American art style, from that of the folk to the most sophisticated individual expression, embodies a transcendence of raw hatred or any other "raw" emotion. Indeed, as with any cultural expression worthy of the name it is transcendence and sublimation that define it as art. And despite the prevalence of stereotyped notions of Negro spontaneity and instinctuality, our life style—at least as it has evolved in the South—has been shaped by a deter

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mined will to control violent emotion (we seldom run amuck) as a life-preserving measure against being provoked into retaliatory actions by those who desire only to destroy us.

One of the functions of such emotional control has been the preservation for ourselves of a maximum freedom of decision in selecting the moment and circumstance under which retaliatory action would be taken and aggressive emotion released. Such control has been often interpreted as apathy and fear by sociologists both black and white, and by those who view us from a distance or who tend to congratulate themselves as being of a superior and nobler race because we avoid easy provocation, but we know better because we cling to our own sense of values and have never been sold on Sir Walter Scottish notions of bravery, cowardice, honor, etc. Such values have a class and race aspect and woe to a minority that forgets it. For here questions of life and death are always just beneath the surface of the simplest confrontations between the races. But another function of such emotional control springs from our will to humanize a hostile society in our own terms and to convert that control into a source of pleasure and affirmation by transforming the threat of social existence into forms of self-definition and triumph.

Thus our resistance to provocation has acted as a life-preserving discipline—which in turn has reinforced our tendency toward stylization, not only in art but in the process of everyday life, from work to worship. What is so ironic about our efforts at literary (as against musical and choreographic) projections of our lifestyle and experience is the fact that we've seldom achieved a formal control—or control of literary forms—commensurate with the control cum flexibility that is so characteristic of Negro American expression at its best. I refer to Negro American idiom as it finds expression in oral tradition and in physical movement, whether in work or play, sports or ceremonial activity, in dress and cosmetic culture; and to the essence of which we hear in Jazz.

But how could I have objected to your use of the terms "Negro artist" or "Negro American experience"? I use them not only in the Bearden piece but in almost everything else I've written about American culture. I have, however, tried to see that the meaning that is conveyed is not primarily racial, but *cultural.* I try to make the terms convey something of the complexity of Negro American life and expression along with their intricate connections with the broader culture of the United States. Because far too often they are used in a manner reductive of that complexity and slighting of those interconnections. When I refer to the plastic possibilities of Negro American experience I am giving recognition to such features of physical identification as hair and skin texture, facial structure, skeletal structure and variation of skin color, etc. Over the centuries, so-called "primitive" African sculptors have made much of these possibilities in terms of their tribal and religious values from the most subtly observed naturalism to the abstract manipulation of forms which in the West we recognize as cubism.

In a predominantly white society where so much vicious nonsense has been imposed upon blacks in the name of European (I almost said "Aryan") standards of physical beauty, the problem of what to do with the given physical features of people who are culturally and visually Negro American became a special problem for the plastic artists of that background. All too many attempted to find a solution through the language of naturalism, when the answer lay, as it lay for most western artists, in the direction of abstraction—very much as it did in the choreographic and literary arts. But since in the fields of painting and sculpture the greatest activity of black Americans came during the Depression and under the auspices of the W.P.A. at a time when agit-prop theories of art were the rage many black artists got hung up on the notion of "content" at the expense of mastering form and technique. But you know all of this.

My reference to Negro Americans depending upon narrative was not meant to imply that other Americans had not so depended; it was to point out that for a people lacking a class with broad formal education as it fought for a positive definition of itself in a society in which an inferior status was imposed upon it by force, violence and anti-Negro stereotypes (the time I referred to, or meant to refer to, was the period of slavery and the early period of emancipation) narrative played a special role. (Yes, I know the narrative function of stained glass windows, items presenting national iconographics, and such in developing religious and national identities for those without literal skills.)

The Negro American's conception of himself was seldom supported by an articulate philosophy, or by conscious theology, or by any of the specifically analytic forms of the mind. Note, too, that I referred to narrative forms that were simple and graphic, and this because the majority of my people were at the time unlettered and, for a great part of that time, enslaved. This was not true of most whites, and at the time that our great American folk archetypes were being created white American intellectuals, with very few blacks participating on a conscious intellectual level, were extending and testing the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment. The spirit of those ideas and ideals was indeed present among the slaves and free blacks but for the majority of slaves, as for many uneducated whites, they required simplification and indeed sloganization. As you damn well know, I view my people as American and not African, and while our experience differs in unique ways from that of white Americans, it is never absolutely at variance with the dominant American mode. Diversity within unity is the confounding reality. Nevertheless, no Negro has ever headed the Stock Exchange, been President of the U.S., Chief of the Combined Armed Forces, or even president of Harvard, Yale, or General Motors. Second, plots and pastoral motives are indeed present in the American drama of blackness and whiteness but here it is prudent not to let oneself be carried away by abstractions.

And now, since you've managed to needle me into type (!) concerning your Wright essay, let me say that I found it a useful piece *despite* my objections. What's more, it gives me a special satisfaction because it gives the lie to the character in *Life* who would make all literary judgment a matter of racial prejudice. You were taking Wright seriously long ago and as far as I know only Irving Howe beat you to the popular press with a re-evaluation of *Native Son*. . . . I am enclosing a more recent piece on yrs truly and Wright in case you missed it.

Now back to my carping. I do by no means agree with your statement that *The Man Who Lived Underground* "is the perfect metaphor for Negro identity in life under the streets in a sewer that is the formulation of *ecclesia supra cloacam.*" Cloacal, yes; Ecclesia, no; metaphor, yes, but perfect not at all. Here I feel like the soldier who was questioned by his captain after being observed shaking his head throughout a lecture on sex during which the captain stated that an orgasm was no more than a form of relief from muscular tension and very much like taking a crap.

"Captain," the soldier said, "I wasn't shaking my head out of disrespect, I just meant that either *you* don't know nothing about fucking or *I* don't know a damn thing about shitting!"

Seriously though, my objection is to what Wright did with his metaphor. I find it too mechanical and his character too limited in mind and sensibility to make it come alive. That is why I continue to reject the notion that *Invisible Man* was inspired by Wright and insist that my character was inspired by the narrator of *Notes from Underground.* My narrator, like Dostoievsky's, is a thinker, and this is true despite the fact that my

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character doesn't think too clearly or too well. Nevertheless, my protagonist does possess a conscious philosophical dimension and is, since he lives by ideas, an intellectual.

In reading your piece I was amazed to discover you involved with the notion of a "racial" line of continuity in fiction by Negro Americans, a notion for which I raised hell with Irving Howe. Why is this notion so compelling, is it that you overlook the fact that such fiction is written by *Americans* and that black American writers are no less the heirs of all the world's fiction than any others? I get the feeling that if ninety-nine Jewish and Irish American writers had used the metaphor of the underground at the same time as Wright and I had read them all you'd still trace my use of it back to Wright. What about the multiplicity of influences available to those who seek for a way of doing things in this country? And what about the fact that books are so ever-present for those who've learned to use them? And magazines? I was reading Babel in issues of *International Literature* before I ever met Wright and I still have the copy of Kafka's *The Trial* which I read in 1937. Nor is this simply a matter of reading European fiction, there were metaphors of the underground right in my own cultural backyard. I had heard the Blues sung and played all my life and an inescapable line was to be heard any day as I made my visits to back alley joints and houses as a delivery boy:

> If you don't believe I'm sinking
> Look what a hole I'm in ...

I was also familiar with stories of being buried alive, and I saw my father put into the ground when I was three years old and remember it vividly. Considering your psychoanalytic bent, surely this would be a more crucial source for my attraction to the metaphor. There was also the story of Lazarus, and Dante's "notes from underground" as well as the various connotations that the term "glory-hole" evoked when used in my community. The point is that, like yourself, I existed in a *field* of influences, both personal and environmental; but despite this obvious fact you go on reducing the complex field to a single writer and implicitly to the *race* of that writer. Well, to convince me that you're correct you must come up with proof that Wright possessed more imagination, or a *richer* imagination than my own.

Anyway, *The Man Who Lived Underground* and *Invisible Man* no more made "a later serious imaginative literature possible" for Negroes than the Biblical story of Jonah made possible *Moby Dick.* Nor do I believe that Hawthorne alone made Melville possible. It is not that writers don't influence other writers but that talent and imagination and instinctive knowledge of how to use *all* that is available to the writer makes the difference. And I don't care what James Baldwin says about the influence of *Black Boy* on his own writing. I don't know when Baldwin conceived *Go Tell It on the Mountain* but I do know that he was working on a novel before Wright went to live in Paris and it was for the completion of that novel that Wright got Baldwin the Saxton Award. Nor did Baldwin meet Wright in Paris, he came to Wright's attention in Harlem, or at least in New York. I recall Wright showing me a picture story in *P.M.*, for which Baldwin had done the captions and Baldwin was working on a novel at that time.

You say of the black militants that they "have taken at least one life-giving position, the 'Black is beautiful' emphasis on pride in Negro identity" and that "in Wright's time this was not possible, and all he could do, in such later work as *The Outsider* was to affirm a self which transcended Negro identity."

Perhaps you're right, but only perhaps. Such slogans as "Black is Beautiful" were in the air during Garvey's day and before; during the thirties pictures of Christ and the Holy Family as Negroes were common in Negro homes, business places and Sunday Schools and songs like "Underneath the Harlem Moon" that praised the beauty of Negro women were common on juke box and radio. Going farther back, the first popular song among Negroes that I can remember being taught (circa 1915-1917) carried the boastful line, "I'm dark brown and chocolate to the bone."

Evidently you see the possibility of one writer influencing another as a one-way street, because if Wright had wanted to avail himself of one literary character's "life-giving emphasis on pride in Negro identity" he could have found it in Chapter 17 of *Invisible Man* where you'll find Ras exhorting Tod Clifton with the words, "You're six feet tall, mahn. You young and intelligent. You black and beautiful—don't let 'em tell you different!" These lines were published, as you well know, sometime before *The Outsider* and I can assure you that Wright had read them. So evidently what was "not possible" for Wright was indeed possible for a sensibility that was attuned novelistically to what was present in the emotional atmosphere in black America.

You wrote that "for this brief period of four or five years, Wright had an aesthetic mastery over his passions. Earlier, he had not yet attained that control, and later he lost it. If a Negro writer never strives for this sort of control, or rejects it as not worth having, he may end as an artless racist demagogue on the order of LeRoi Jones; if he overcontains his emotions, he becomes a white Negro writer, in the long gray line from Phillis Wheatley to Frank Yerby."

How would you translate this if the writer in question were a Jew? The equation bothers me because as I see it, even when granted your assumption that the Negro writer's main problem is the successful transformation of racial hatred into art (an assumption that I reject) it would appear that the writer who fails or over-contains his emotion does not become as you say a "white" Negro writer—unless in this instance you mean "white" to be inferior—he just becomes a poor or inadequate writer—*or* a first-rate writer of fiction who is empty of that vibrancy which stirs the reader to new perceptions of reality and a quickened perception of the possibilities of art.

In Yerby's case, isn't it the form in which he chose to work that determines what his work has become? Its quality, rather than what he has done, or not done, with racially inspired emotion? Yerby is a practitioner of a form of fiction characterized by its thinness of emotion and by the slight demands that it makes upon the writer's personal passions, obsessions, or what not. Nor is there any literary law which holds that Negroes are not free to work in this field of fiction. Nor is any moral law violated when he chooses to do so, unless it is the morality of choosing an inferior aesthetic form for the expression of one's talents. And anyway, how do we know that Yerby has any passion to express?

What I'm trying to say is that racial identity does not dominate individual culture so absolutely as you would seem to believe. Nor does it override the individual will in the aesthetic realm as certain sociology-minded critics and black militant theorists would have us believe. Accidents of birth, geography, personal contacts, the availability of models, cultural examples, individual psychic dimensions and the cultural climate in which the individual comes to consciousness can, and often do, play a more important role than racial identity—*when that individual begins to function as an artist.* However, as citizen, as member of a minority group living within a racist society, the role of the individual writer's racial identity is inescapable in most situations where he is anonymous, or his role of artist unknown, or regarded as of no importance. Said a young white professor of English to me after a lecture out in northern Illinois, "Mr. E., how does it feel to be able to go to places where most black men can't go?"

Said I to him, "What you mean is, how does it feel to be able to go places where most *white* men can't go."

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My point was that I was no abstraction in the black and white division of American society, but an individual with countless connections that over-rode my status as a "Negro." For while my status and statistical identity is that of a black, I am also an individual with an individual destiny, and an individual past. Besides, why should I let a teacher assume that simply because he was white all doors were open to him? There are plenty of black doors that are closed to me, no less than they'd be to him; he simply couldn't imagine that such existed.

Race and culture, culture and race! Why demand (if that's what you're doing) that Phillis Wheatley's *racial* identity produce a type of poetry that was alien to her personal culture? Why demand that she feel emotions that nothing in her life or the codes of the society in which she grew up prepared her to feel? After all, she was no more "southern" than George Washington or Ben Franklin, therefore it seems to me unreasonable to treat her as though she were denying her heritage when, in effect, she was giving expression to the only heritage of which she was aware. She couldn't write out of the Negro American folk culture that was thriving in the South because she had no contact with it. And like most of our early New England poets she was probably more British in her personal culture than "American." After all, the poor woman was born in Africa in 1753 and died in 1784. She was brought to New England at the age of seven and grew up and was educated in a white household at a time when the Wesley-Whitfield revival was sweeping the region. Her problem, or the problem of her poetry, was that she took Pope as a model, and it was this which made her work so arid. Phillis Wheatley's failure was a failure shared by most early New England poets, she came on the scene before Americans had learned to express the Americanness of the budding culture. I don't believe it valid to criticize her for having failed in her sheltered Boston slavery, with her smattering of classical education, to embody a Negro American tradition to which she was alien. For her it was a question of being the kind of writer she was (which was not a very competent one) or of being no kind of writer at all. You might [as] well have criticized her for not having written in the language of Senegal, French or Arabic, from which she was separated at the age of seven.

Well, I guess this is enough abuse from someone who seldom writes this type of letter anymore. I'll close by saying how pleased I am to see that our earlier hassle over these matters has just appeared in *Black Literature in America: A Casebook*, published by Crowell. I hope you've been paid and that things go well for you and Phoebe. Fanny sends love.

Yours sincerely,
Ralph

[1] Stanley Edgar Hyman, folklorist and critic whom Ellison called "an old friend and intellectual sparring partner."
2 "The Art of Romare Bearden," first published as the introduction to the catalog *Romare Bearden: Paintings and Projection* for an exhibition held at the Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Albany, November 25–December 22, 1968.
[3] Playwright, poet, novelist, and critic Leroi Jones, also known as Amiri Baraka.

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May 18, 1971

Hank Wilson
Coordinator of Community Relations
Southern Illinois University

Dear Mr. Wilson:

Thank you for writing me concerning your projected thesis study, "Toward a Model with Rationale for Black Studies Curriculums."

I don't believe, however, that I can be of any assistance to you, since I have never taught Black Studies as such. It is my opinion that disciplines such as history and literature when taught must include Negro American reality but that it cannot be taught separately since it did not evolve separately.

Thus, when I teach American literature I include Negro American folklore and the writings of black authors—but always within the context of American literature. This has been my approach since 1945 when I first began lecturing before student and faculty groups.

Sincerely yours,
Ralph Ellison

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December 22, 1976

Dear Mr. Porter,[1]

... Looking back I'm glad that I had that opportunity to talk with Amherst students and I'm pleased that, despite your unhappiness, you stuck out your time there. I suspected that much of the discomfort which Afro-American students were going through at that time was simply the anguish of the initial college experience (any college) and was not essentially different than that I experienced many years before at Tuskegee. Perhaps the difference was that during the '60s students had been given a facile name for their unhappiness, and one which provided many of them an excuse for rejecting academic discipline. Those who worked on their studies while they protested I could respect, but what on earth could I do about the many who appeared to be throwing away a much better opportunity for an education than that for which my mother and I had had to make such great sacrifice. No ideological catch words could blind me to the fact that they were wasting a valuable opportunity for learning how to convert their anger into forms of conscious thought and creative action. The need to control and transcend mere anger has been our lot throughout our history, and for many years failing to do so, as the saying goes, got you dead. Nor are things essentially different today, for no matter the headiness of our slogans, an unthinking indulgence in anger can lead to a socially meaningless self-immolation and to intellectual suicide. From your essay it strikes me that you were most fortunate in your background because it kept you from wandering too far from your chosen goal. Even your religion appears to have served you well by providing channels for your emotions and giving support to your hopes and aspirations. I'm reminded that during my own college days my mother's religious faith was a firm support, even when I was so entranced by the ideas of Bernard Shaw that I went two weeks without food while working in the school kitchen. I was getting drunk on ideas but her faith helped to keep my feet down there on that red Alabama clay. But then, even for a doubter, faith is a gamble on the future and a compass against chaos and, as you discovered, bending the knees isn't the only way to pray.

I smiled when you referred to the experience of being in an environment where for the first time you could use a vocabulary previously confined to your reading and thinking. In my case I knew many words that I couldn't even pronounce, words I hadn't bothered to sound simply because there were no occasions for using them without appearing pretentious. Once I shocked a white man whose shoes I was shining by revealing that I was familiar with Freud's theory of dreams,[2] but neither of us were prepared to communicate on that level, for it would have placed too great a strain on the arrangements of social hierarchy—and on the two of us! But the freeing possibilities of books are so obvious that I continue to be amazed that so many of our young people avoid them. And yet, wherever books find attentive readers and no matter how unlikely the place, marvelous transformations of possibility occur; for you in Georgia, for me in Oklahoma.

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Speaking of Georgia, I once played dances at a hall located on the top floor of the building which housed Lunceford's Drug Store, drank beer at a beer garden operated by a Miss Outlaw, and visited the home of Dr. Brewer who, you might recall, lost his life during a civil rights incident in Columbus. It might interest you to know that I, too, am familiar with kerosene lamps, horse and mule teams and the rest—even though I never lived in the country. In fact, when I left home for Tuskegee we had a corral in the back yard which my mother rented to a landscape gardener who kept his livestock there. During the summer of my sixteenth year I had so much trouble working with his team of mean little Spanish mules that I came to understand why it is said that many of our preachers were called to the ministry after a hard day of looking a mule in the behind. Speaking of making up our faces and our minds, perhaps the mule connection is precisely what's missing in the experience of many who see protest as the only means of doing something about racial injustice. It's considered bad form to mention such matters (i.e., the first Negro to do this or that), but when the returns are all in it might well be observed that while I was being criticized for being inactive I was actually exploring in places where no blacks had been before but where today, thanks to such venturing, it is fairly common to find us. I've always felt that Americans by definition are frontiersmen. Whether we see the frontier as geographical, as intellectual, as hierarchical, or as a combination of all three—which they most often are—we are obligated to explore and master new areas of living. Yes, and thinking. And this is even more true of Afro-Americans who have been prevented from knowing many of the most important processes of this society. Thus if we would change society it is imperative that we possess some concrete idea of its complexity. I wouldn't have believed that I'd ever see the day when that old line about "free schools, white schools and dumb boots," would apply to the Ivy League, but dam' if it didn't! Anyway, for us to remain in one narrow groove while ranting about "freedom" strikes me as an affront to those who endured and sacrificed to enable us to become better prepared for our continuing role in the struggle for freedom. There are many ways of participating in that struggle and I'm consoled that Dostoievsky found his most meaningful outlet for gambling not in the streets or at the roulette wheel but in putting pressure on the form of the novel....

Sincerely yours,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Horace A. Porter graduated from Amherst College in 1972 and is now a professor of English at Stanford University.

[2] See Ellison's account of this incident in his testimonial for John Wright below.

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[Testimonial for John Wright, circa 1979-1981.[1]]

In offering my enthusiastic support for John Wright's project let me relate a personal anecdote.

Years ago (I was about ten at the time) while shining shoes in downtown Oklahoma City one of my customers was a white college student who engaged in lively banter with a friend who occupied the next chair. The two were having a conversation in which Freudian terms flew back and forth, and after delivering a flourish having to do with sex, repression and psychic displacement my customer leaned down, rubbed my startled head and said, "Now isn't that right, George?"

"Yes," I said, measuring him for the possibility of a physical response (he was much too big) but without missing a stroke with my polishing brush—he was wearing brown shoes with a blue suit—"and if the super-ego doesn't get you the ego probably will.... Not to mention the libido."

I was merely mouthing words I'd picked up when reading Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*—which I'd mistaken for the type of dream book used by numbers players—but I can still see his shocked expression as I returned his stare out of a face made blank to hide my annoyance over his double offense of touching my head and calling me "George." I had already reached for a bottle of sole dressing, waiting for his next move but suddenly his friend was roaring with laughter and he was so flabbergasted that he climbed down from the stand, paid me and rushed out without tipping.

I relate this incident by way of suggesting that there is still no reliable sociology of ideas in this diverse, pluralistic society (a society in which it was once common to find Ph.D.s carrying bags as Red Caps in railroad stations) and thus there is no way of knowing, except, perhaps, beyond the boundaries of academia, just where ideas will penetrate and find receptive minds. Nor do we have any reliable ideas of what happens when seminal ideas take root within the Negro community. And yet it is precisely in this uncharted area that ideas often land, become democratized and undergo startling metamorphoses. (Think of what happens when musical ideas are taken over by jazzmen.) And imagine a culture in which a young Negro bootblack uses Freud to put a white customer in his place! And yet the incident is as true as the fact that W.E.B. DuBois studied at Harvard and used knowledge gained there in shaping his conception of American society and its central issues. The same is true of many other thinking Negroes and it is quite possible that such relative peace as this turbulent nation has enjoyed owes much to their having opted to make some intellectual sense out of the disparity between American ideals and American experience as they lived it. The experience of the '60s and '70s teems with examples of what life might have been had they *rejected* the ideals of democracy and sought to see themselves and act in other terms.

Fortunately, American experience is of a whole and despite its differences of race and religion, class and region it is still inspirited by the same ideals. But *un*fortunately scholarship has neglected the intellectual history of Afro-Americans just as (until fairly recently) it has neglected the underside of American history generally, and thus we suffer from a distorted vision of the national past. John Wright is aware of this and from what I know of him and his writings he will produce a work which will tell us much not simply of Afro-American intellectual history, but of American cultural history as a whole.

[Ralph Ellison]

[1] Then on the faculty of Carleton College, John Wright is now chairman of Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Minnesota.

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March 20, 1977

Mr. G.A. Smith
Head of Dept. of General Studies
Wulfrun College of Further Education[1]

Dear Mr. Smith:

"In a Strange Country"[2] was written as a short story during World War II, and was published in the now defunct American magazine, *Tomorrow*, in July, 1944. Although imaginary, it was an attempt to give fictional form to some of the American racial conflict that was to be observed in the European Theater of Operations at that time, and to suggest the perspective of irony afforded a young Afro-American by a voyage to Wales. As a merchant seaman I became slightly familiar with war-time Swansea, Cardiff and Barry and used Swansea as a setting for my fiction. The fact in the fiction, however, does not lie in any personal experience of racial difficulties encountered there, but in my having

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shared the warm hospitality of a few private homes—one of them the quite Victorian residence of a collier owner—and a memorable evening of drinking in a men's club where the communal singing was excellent. I was also familiar with a club operated by the American Red Cross in a village a few miles north of Swansea. I recall that it was frequented mostly by Afro-American GI's, and that the Welsh ladies who prepared the food not only did amazing things with powdered eggs but prepared a delicious salad from the flesh of hares. My seaman's rating was that of Second Cook and Baker and I assure you that I found much to envy in the culinary resourcefulness of those ladies.

It has been years since I've looked at the story, but it was not conceived as part of a longer work and the form in which it was reprinted is as complete as I was able to fashion it under the wartime conditions which inspired it.

You might consult Afro-American newspapers for accounts of Black American G.I.s in Britain. At the time our armed forces were segregated the black newspapers were duly attentive.

Sincerely yours,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Wulfrun College is located in Wolverhampton, England.
[2] The story appears in *Flying Home and Other Stories.*

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August 13, 1978

Dear Bert and Tom:[1]

... Life is certainly amusing. Last summer I was walking up a street in Northampton (which is the home of Smith College), carrying a new rake that I'd just bought from Sears back to where I'd parked the car—when on my way I bumped into a young Negro student. With his hair bushed out in an Afro and wearing new overalls he came toward me doing a pimp-limp, or hustler's walk, that would have been right in place down in Deep Second[2] during the 1930s. Northampton is a predominantly white New England city but this fellow had brought his own funky atmosphere with him. Such kids would wear cotton sacks if it attracted attention. And so to test his reaction when caught off guard, I held up the rake and said, "Just look at us, brother, my father and your grandfather probably worked like hell to get away from the farm so that we could be born to an easier life in town, but just look at how it all turned out: You're going to a fancy college wearing overalls, and I'm walking around this white man's city carrying a cast-iron rake. And what's more, instead of thinking of farming as hard labor as *they* probably did, I'm doing it for exercise and pleasure, while you're probably wearing those overalls because they're now the latest style!"

Well, I don't have to tell you that the young man looked at me as though I was crazy—which he damn sure did. For a moment he stared at me with embarrassment—then he took off. Only now, my hitting him with that little bit of truth had shocked him out of that pimp-limp walk; and as he hustled away I hoped that later he'd come to realize that I'd simply been reminding him of a bit of American Negro history. Because there he was, a student in overalls while I, a college professor—a fact of which he was unaware—was carrying a garden rake. But that's life; you take one step forward and two steps back....

Yours sincerely,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Alberta and Thomas Brown of Oklahoma City; Tom Brown, son of Lucretia Ellison Brown, was Ellison's first cousin.
[2] The block in Oklahoma City where, according to Ellison, "most Negro business and entertainment was then found."

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February 27, 1979

John Taggart[1]

Dear John Taggart,

... Usually such jaunts leave me exhausted, but this time I *arrived* exhausted and it was your talk of your days at the University of Chicago, of mutual friends and of jazz that served to revive me. I only wish that there had been time to really listen to your stereo system while exploring your record collection. In fact, I would have enjoyed even hearing your comments on that mass of Coltrane!

Which is to say that I'm always interested in the play of a poet's mind, and especially when it recognizes the richness of jazz. Unfortunately, the majority of poets I know are most uneducated—and uninterested—in this area of our culture. Thus the fact that you were able to collect so many poems inspired by a single jazzman was for me a most pleasant and instructive experience. Writers of my generation seem to make little or nothing of the fact that both Louie and Eliot were washed by ole man Mississippi, while you appear to have been born knowing that, despite its many divisions, American culture is of a whole. Anyway, perhaps it's no accident that both Eliot and Armstrong were great quoters and masters of the art of juxtaposition; men who knew how to use whatever there was to use, and in original ways. I guess I could go on and riff awhile on that notion, but this is not the time, so I won't. But I'm sure you understand....

Sincerely yours,
[Ralph Ellison]

[1] A professor at Shippenburg State College in Shippenburg, Pennsylvania, at whose Lyceum Ellison had recently spoken.

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May 2, 1982

James Randolph[1]

Dear Jim,

... Fanny and I have been going through a bit of hurly-burly here, thanks to the publication of the thirtieth anniversary edition of my novel, a most unexpected event despite the fact that there have been many editions since it first appeared in 1952. Yet there have been far more interviews than I can recall from the days it was issued, and I'd be a liar if I said that all the new publicity didn't please me.

There have been reporters and photographers, an appearance on the "Today Show"—all apparently set off by an interview in *The New York Times* which appeared, all unknowing to me, on my birthday. All of the new attention is somewhat bewildering but nevertheless satisfying when I consider all of the crap I had to take from some of the so-called Black Radicals during the late '60s and most of the '30s. Still, we tried to escape at least *some* of the to-do by spending a couple of weeks down in Key West, where we own a small house. The weather was quite a contrast with that of New York, being in the upper eighties, but we enjoyed the tropical lushness. But then we returned here in time for the blizzard and it was [as] though we hadn't been away. Fortunately, we were able to go south again shortly afterwards, this time to Colonial Williamsburg, on whose board of directors I've served for a number of years. So there we found spring again, with the foliage in blossom and the birds singing their heads off. It is a lovely part of the country and by now we've become accustomed to working out problems with the likes of old Virginians and the heads of major corporations with whom I'd never dreamed I'd even come within speaking distance. Well, we have and the one thing I've learned is that people are only people and once we are able to come into neutral contact

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there is much to be learned and much to share, and that included pleasures as well as problems. You should see Fanny by candlelight during a formal dinner in what was once a great plantation mansion! She looks like she was to the manor born—only it took a hell of a time to get her there.

Seriously though, I've learned something of how things really go in this crazy country and I've come to believe that the real root of many of our problems is not race so much as the contention over power. Of course this is but to say the obvious, since the mystique of race is used to confuse the issue, and none are more confused than some of those who would elect to lead us, many of whom know less about how the country operates than a skilled bell-hop or a quietly observant waiter. Americans are contenders for power and in the contending we often become confused as to how our interests coincide, and thus the common human aspects of issues become clouded in terms of who's black and who's white. It's really a miserable bore, but that's what history has stuck us, and we'll remain stuck until we realize that there's a hell of a lot more to our predicament than race....

Ralph

[1] An old friend of Ellison's from Oklahoma City.

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November 23, 1982

Professor James L. Roark[1]

Dear Professor Roark:

I have read yours and Professor Johnson's manuscript with engrossed attention and find it most fascinating. Never before have I found the experience of the free slaveholding caste of antebellum Negroes brought to life in such vibrant detail. To be able to detect what Henry James called the "density of felt experience" behind the enigmatic details of the letters is indeed a scholarly achievement of a high order and, I think, a contribution to all who would grasp the complexity of our American past.

Thanks to your imaginative research and reconstruction the William Ellisons, their families and friends can no longer be regarded abstractly as traitors to a racial identity which they shared with many slaves, but must now be viewed as ingenuous human beings who possessed a unique cultural identity and who lived and grappled with the complex problems posed by a specific period of our turbulent history. The very fact that they were able to travel, the law notwithstanding, back and forth between South Carolina, New York and Canada comes as an intriguing surprise, and I can imagine Henry James passing them on his strolls up Broadway—with the great master of the novel of manners being totally unaware of the mocking "American joke" being acted out before his unseeing eyes. Their color was their fate—yes, but their culture—most southern and yet most American—was an assault upon the logical illogic of racism. Truly, there was much more to their kind than met the color-blinded eye.

Bearing such a surname, it has long been my fate to have individuals who become belatedly aware of my South Carolina lineage to attempt to thrust a kinship with that ambiguous caste upon me; specifically, a presumed kinship with William Ellison. Thus there was a time when my notions of racial loyalty led me to deny it outright. Later I confessed that I truly didn't know of such a kinship but that I was more than willing to let the past retain its mystery. In fact I was quite amused whenever I found my white Southern friends electing themselves aristocratic backgrounds that were pieced together out of little more than the moonlight and magnolias of movie and historical romance. For I suspected that history operates in the present in far more interesting, and subtle, ways than they could ever devise and that at best they were but exercising their American freedom to make art of a past that was ofttimes squalid.

Still, as a novelist concerned with the morality of our American experience I was forced to conclude that whatever the facts turned out to be, there was no more disgrace in one's being related by blood to a *black* slaveholder than to those who happened to have been designated "white" (designation by others having so much to do with which side of the color line one landed on in the first place)—which, like so many Afro-Americans, I most certainly am; and this on both sides of my family tree. Nevertheless, the possibility that I *might* in fact be related to William Ellison left me uneasy, for as the saying goes, I had enough troubles of my own and no need whatsoever to give myself aristocratic airs. Besides, I had come to accept the fact that most attempts at moralizing history in retrospect are a risky business, and to do so is to find oneself up to one's neck in myth and in questions of morality that are most difficult to answer. The closest I have been able to come in any basic way is to say that slavery was a crass violation of the ideal democratic compact upon which this republic was erected, and that all else flows from that initial fall from a transcendent ideal.

So, as I say, if the question of my possible kinship with William Ellison still leaves me somewhat uneasy your revelations have given him a richly human dimension. And if it should turn out that my grandfather happened to have been both William's blood relative and his chattel, nothing will have been changed. The murky mystery of blood and race, color and property will remain and I'll still have the task of giving my own individual content to the Ellison name....

Sincerely,
Ralph Ellison

[1] A history professor at the University of Missouri at St. Louis.

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November 6, 1984

John Roche[1]

Dear John:

... Anyway, after this unforgivable delay let me hasten to thank you for the *Beale Street Blues*. I am absolutely delighted to have it in my collection of precious things, and shall treasure it along with my signed copy of Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabelle* and parts of manuscripts by Malraux and Silone which Fanny gave me years ago. I took it as a good omen that the score arrived in the same batch of mail that brought a biography of the late Hazel Harrison, who was a teacher friend from my days in the Tuskegee music school. For Hazel, a fine classical pianist who arrived on the scene too early to be granted nationwide recognition which now comes relatively easy for Negro artists, was a prize pupil of Busoni and herself a powerful example, both as performer and teacher. Sad to say, it is not much of a biography but by arriving along with the Handy[2] it served nevertheless to remind me of how constantly the two streams of culture out of which I come have merged, been transformed, and merged again to bring me influences from distant places. Hazel was a friend of Prokofiev and Percy Grainger, neither of whom I was ever to see in person, but through her stories and demonstration on the piano I was able to widen my range and relate more closely with their music.

With Handy, however, it was different for I had grown up with his music and legend, and during the late nineteen forties our apartment was but a block away from his. He was blind by that time but I often saw him when walking through the block where he lived on Convent Avenue and thus was able to greet him and wish him well. I really wanted to talk with him about music bu

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wasn't enough of a reporter to ask for an interview. Besides, he knew me only as one of many admiring voices heard in the street and therefore I satisfied myself with the knowledge that I lived near a great composer.

Years earlier, when I was down-and-out in Dayton, Ohio, I attended a football game between two Negro schools which began with the home team's band playing "America." But then, after paying it their solemn respects, they bridged smoothly into the "Saint Louis Blues" as though it were an even more exalted "national" anthem. At first I was startled but then quickly realized that, in a sense, it was indeed a national anthem and quite fitting for inspiring emotions needed for a football game—or any damn thing else of national significance.

Those were days when the only way I could read a copy of *The New York Times* was by walking a mile or so from the Negro section into downtown Dayton—which I did daily so that I could read Hemingway's dispatches from the Spanish Civil War, which I studied for style as well as for information. For me it was a period of disorientation in more ways than one. For at a time when I was making my uncertain transition from music to literature I had rushed to Ohio because of my mother's death. Then, being broke and unable to find work, I was forced to remain in an area which seemed to have little connection with the world I'd left behind in New York. There I had been involved in the agitation over the war in Spain, but the Ohio papers gave it as little coverage as they gave racial relations. In brief, I was at loose ends in a world that had fallen apart. But as Malraux has written, art is an assault upon logic. Thus hearing the "Saint Louis Blues" juxtaposed with our national anthem not only worked wonders for my morale, but told me something of where I was politically while suggesting that even for a writer the example of a folk-based art such as Handy's could not only transcend the divisions of race, politics and geography, but could speak—at least to my own sense of the national experience—with far more force and resonance than Samuel Francis Smith's "America." Perhaps I exaggerate a bit, but whatever the truth may be there's no question but that Handy lifted me out of a deep depression and I'm most grateful to have a score inscribed by his hand.

That's all for now because I want to get this into the mail, but after election day perhaps you'll tell me what the hell is happening to this country. Meanwhile our love to you and your lady from me and mine, and once again my thanks.

Sincerely,
Ralph

[1] John P. Roche, former special adviser to Lyndon Johnson and a founder of Americans for Democratic Action.
[2] Called the "Father of the Blues" by some, including himself, W.C. Handy became a legend after composing "Saint Louis Blues" in 1914.

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April 17, 1989

Robert O'Meally[1]

Dear Robert O'Meally:

The other day while glancing through a copy of an MLA publication, *Approaches to Teaching "Invisible Man,"* I was reminded that I'd failed to thank you for your gift of the *New Essays.* I thank you now, and for your selections and introduction. For while I'm much too subjective to offer an unbiased criticism I'd venture that they're some of the best I've read, and I'm pleased that your readers will now be aware of my debts to the likes of Burke and Bergson. I'm also grateful for your giving some of the novel's history, much of which I'd either ignored or forgotten. Perhaps after reading your introduction some of our lazy would-be critics will realize that we don't inherit our ancestral lore through skin and genes but must pay it the respect of research and study.

Which is to say that even home-boys must do their "home-work." And especially those young middle class city types who were born generations after the slave experience and so far away from the south, Negro church, cotton patch and poolhall that they think that Peter Wheatstraw, Dobie Hicks, Uncle Bud, and Sweet the Monkey were single individuals instead of mythic figures who spring out of the mist of interracial, intercultural mythology. I wonder how many of those to whom I refer know how to belly-rub, signify, or have a tooth for chitt'lings. Or possess enough consciousness of their complex American background as to appreciate the atmosphere of a 1930s Lenox Avenue restaurant, where when a customer ordered barbecued ribs the waiters and countermen would shout to the chef-capped cook, "Gimme a breast of Guinea hen!" Those fellows made comedy of the contrast between their bill of fare and those offered by posh downtown restaurants and knew precisely what they were doing.

And what would some of such critics make of Negro headwaiters who could endow rich, upwardly mobile whites with status among their peers simply by treating them with deference, or deny them an aspired-to in-group status by treating them with a polite but observable coolness? Yet this often happened, with the headwaiter taking over the role of kingmaker and the whites accepting his judgment—And this in the old South!...

Sincerely,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Robert O'Meally is an Ellison scholar and Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

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September 7, 1990

Lowry Ware[1]

Dear Mr. Ware:

I am most grateful for your gift from my grandfather's past. For not only is it one of the most unexpected communications I've ever received, but it does much to fill some of the gaps in my vague knowledge of an ancestor whose story has intrigued me since my childhood.

I say "vague" because for years my mental image of my grandfather was overcast by a veil of myth-like incongruities through which I was barely able to imagine the man of flesh and blood. Much of this had to do with age, geography, and patriarchal authority. I heard of him first when I was a young child, and the idea of his being the *father* of my own father and aunt, both tall and vigorous people, caused me to view the abstract image which I held in my mind with an element of awe. He was the respected patriarch of a family whose oldest members had migrated to my birthplace in Oklahoma but lived worlds away in South Carolina. Therefore I knew of his existence only through older relatives who endowed his image with an aura of authority that I had no way of grasping. So while he was the head of my clan, the only way I had of imagining his role as my grandfather was by observing the styles and manners of elderly men who were close at hand. These were the grandsires of my young friends, but my attempt to give detail to the abstract image of my own grandfather proved ineffectual. For while I could observe the grandfathers of my friends in the processes of daily action mine remained a structure of mere words, and thus difficult to relate to the times and the life around me.

The difficulty arose in part because through having lived in Abbeville my older cousins knew our grandfather in person and informed me that he had been a former slave. Which I could understand, because there were a number of former slaves living in our community. Still when my cousins went on to marvel over his knowledge of South Carolina politics and politicians I was

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totally confused. But they insisted that when the newspapers were read to him aloud he would order his readers to repeat passages that he found questionable. And despite the fact that the politicians involved were usually white he would then interpret the underlying clashes of interests, discuss the probable motives, and then explain his disagreement with the paper's account.

Here I must add that the newspaper items that you were so kind to send me are accounts of incidents that occurred long before my Oklahoma cousins were born. But since my grandfather had children and grandchildren close at hand I would assume that their mother was among those who did. Years later a cousin who lived in North Carolina told me that she had indeed read aloud for my grandfather's information, so I assume that he continued this custom until his death.

As for me, the very idea of my grandfather's political knowledge was baffling. For not only was I born far from the land where old time things are not forgotten, I was also too young to grasp the idea of his being what I would now describe as an "inside-outsider." By which I mean an individual who is aware of the values and functioning of a society in which he is denied most of its freedoms and guarantees. Such individuals still exist, and although illiterate they are often possessors of a sharp native intelligence and are capable of a certain wisdom born of experience, a retentive memory, and a sharp attention to the ways of society. I can't say that my grandfather possessed any of this, but his fragmentary "myth" suggests that he did. I also know that there is no necessary correlation between literacy and wisdom, for even today some wise men are illiterate.

Be that as it may, I do have proof that my grandfather had personal knowledge of some of those whose activities received newspaper coverage. For when I reached my teens I came to know that he had business dealings with a former lieutenant of General Robert E. Lee. This was Sam McGowan, who rose to the rank of General and served later as the Chief Justice of South Carolina. I learned of the personal relationship between the General and my grandfather around 1938, when I found among my mother's papers the deed through which property owned by General Sam McGowan was transferred to Alfred Ellison. Then only a few years ago I was amused to learn through the kindness of a white southern researcher that my grandfather had once arrested the future General and Chief Justice of South Carolina for committing some boyish prank.

I wish I had more to tell you, but my closest link to the subject of your research was my Aunt Lucretia, who had migrated to Oklahoma shortly after my father and mother settled there. But even here I had problems.

For although my aunt possessed fierce family pride she was most guarded in what she said to my younger brother and me about our grandparents and the family's life in South Carolina. Perhaps because after having lived during the Reconstruction and aftermath of the Hayes-Tilden compromise she felt that the family had fallen from a higher estate and feared burdening us with the disappointed dreams and hopes of the family's past. (Incidentally, our mother, who adored our father and saw to it that his memory remained vividly alive, often warned us against giving in to what she considered the Ellisons' sin of inordinate pride.)

Over the years, however, our aunt did drop bits of information through which I learned that our grandfather had once had a role in local politics, and that one of his brothers had served in the South Carolina legislature. But being ignorant of Reconstruction history I took this with a grain of salt. For since there were no Negro officials, either city or state, in the Oklahoma of my childhood, how could such a thing happen in South Carolina?

My aunt also hinted that my grandfather was of such unusual status, at least for a Negro of his times and place, that accounts of his activities had often appeared in the local newspaper. For this she offered no proof, but now at long last you, yourself, have provided printed evidence of the truth of her assertions. What's more, your evidence confirms that which I received from the researcher mentioned above. But as far as I can remember the only newspaper item that she described in any detail was an account of the death of her mother and baby brother whose lives were lost in a fire. Should you come across an account of that incident I would be gratified to have a copy.

To be brief, it wasn't until I reached my teens that my fragments of information concerning Alfred Ellison began to take on any semblance of reality, and this through reading historical accounts of the Reconstruction. But even then I was frustrated in my attempts to give order to my grandfather's ambiguity as former slave, law man ("magistrate" was the old English term of his time), farmer-politician, and insightful but unlettered citizen. The man of flesh and blood remained remote within his crossword puzzle of a legend, but I finally began making a bit of sense regarding my aunt's (aristocratic?) disdain for most of the Negro professionals who dominated the social life of our Oklahoma community. For me the fact that she [was] a mere laundress made her disdain most puzzling, and this despite the fact that her expert services were eagerly sought by upper class whites. And while I respected her opinions and great skills as a cook it was inescapable that she had none of the social status of our ministers, physicians, real estate men, or teachers.

Nevertheless, she maintained her lofty attitude, kept to herself, and frequently reminded my brother and me that we came from an important family and should, therefore, bear our inherited name with honor and pride. For me this was like being told that we had inherited a great fortune which we would enjoy once we found its hiding place. Of course the next step in that perilous quest would be to vanquish the guardian spirit of the faithful slave who had been slain and buried after promising to give the fortune eternal protection. This pattern I knew from hearing ghost stories of the Civil War, but who had been the sacrificial slave, where was he buried, and how would I confront his spirit? As I say, for me my grandfather was shrouded in myth, and only the fact that my own father's memory remained highly respected long after his death gave my aunt's assertions the least bit of reality.

In the meantime my brother and I identified with the friends of our parents, most of whom had migrated to Oklahoma from the South, and this whether they were working folk or professionals. Indeed it was among these and the jazz musicians who soon followed that I found heroes and role models as interesting as those I encountered in books. And while I took an abstract pride in being the grandson of the mysterious Alfred Ellison he remained almost as abstract as the photographic image which I found among my father's possessions: A brown-skinned patriarch with veiled eyes and head of thick dark hair who faced the camera sporting a white goatee that was carefully trimmed in the then current style.

I hasten to add, however, that my abstract sense of my grandfather's personality is by no means due to my having failed to meet him in person. Rather it was because of the gap between our ages, my ignorance of my family's background, and the rapidity of change which marks American history. For shortly after my father's death I did indeed meet my grandfather.

This was through an incident which came about (or so I was told years later) because Alfred Ellison had become curious about his recently deceased son's three-year-old brat of a boy. And so it was that I came to be taken to Abbeville by my older cousins, Tom and Maybell, who were the children of my grandfather's oldest daughter, my Aunt Lucretia Ellison Brown. I have no idea of the length

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of our visit but it couldn't have been more than a month; because the adult in charge, my cousin Tom, was a Frisco Railroad brakeman. And since the Frisco made free passes available to its employees' relatives he probably arranged for the trip to take place during his summer vacation.

Be that as it may, it was through Tom that I spent a few days with Alfred Ellison and my Aunt Bell and Uncle Jim, the two adult children who lived with him on the old home place. And it is thanks to that visit that I retain a child's vivid but spotty memories of the family's old home and its owner. These include its fireplaces that were so tall that a three-year-old could step beneath the mantles and peer up the chimneys, my Aunt Bell's cooking, and the huge feather bed in which I slept. I also remember the fresh fruit, melons, and vegetables that were gathered each day and heaped on the back porch to be carefully sorted and arranged for the market—which suggests that my grandfather was still active as a farmer.

I also remember Abbeville's huge moths, its butterflies, and the swarms of fireflies which an older neighborhood boy taught me to catch and store in a bottle, and the fun of watching them twinkle and glow through the glass at nightfall. But best of all there were the tall pecan trees, which were said to have been planted by my father, and with the fruit of which I was distantly familiar thanks to Christmas holidays when my Aunt Lucretia was sure to receive a gunny sack filled with that delicious share of her old home's bounty.

Since I remember my grandfather as being as taciturn as he appears in the photograph mentioned above I have no idea as to what he thought of his grandson. He was said to have been quite proud of my father so I think that he found me acceptable. At any rate we got along fairly well, perhaps because we were united in our mutual grief. And my only unfavorable memory of the trip has to do with a violent nighttime storm. The next morning the air was quite clear and as I accompanied my Uncle Jim on a walk to assess the storm's damage we came upon a nest of fledgling birds that had been blown from their home in a tree.

So around and about I had come
Upon that which I had started from.

Sincerely yours,
Ralph Ellison

[1] Lowry Ware, a South Carolina historian, is author of *Old Abbeville: Scenes of the Past of a Town Where Old Time Things Are Not Forgotten* (1972) with a chapter on Ellison's grandfather "Big Alfred" Ellison. •

TRB *continued from page 4*

my child in my arms." Before the speech, that famous Linda Bloodworth-Thomason-produced video about the Man from Hope featured gauzy footage of Bill, Hillary, and Chelsea, swinging in a hammock.

Chelsea, in short, has served to advertise a blissful family situation that, we now know, doesn't exist. During the recent unpleasantness, the first daughter has played a similar silent role. The Clintons first played the Chelsea card just after the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke, when Jesse Jackson was allowed to go on "Larry King Live" to tell the country about his private chats with the first daughter, in which, he averred, she made it clear that she was standing by Pop all the way. After the president's August 17, 1998, admission that he had been lying to the country (and to Hillary and Chelsea) about Monica, Chelsea once again surfaced. First we saw her striding between her parents to the presidential Marine helicopter, holding each of them by the hand—figuratively demonstrating that the family was damaged but intact. Then she appeared on Martha's Vineyard, hugging Vernon Jordan, smiling and shaking hands with well-wishers, and whooshing about on Walter Cronkite's sailboat.

So the truth is that, with regard to their daughter, the Clintons have never fully abandoned the traditional double standard. They've just manipulated it better than others have. You can't blame them for trying. But you also can't blame *People* for recognizing what's going on and acting accordingly. Given that the White House had made Chelsea a part of the story, albeit only symbolically, the magazine had a right to try to find out what the substance behind the symbolism might be—even if it's pretty clear that *People* was more interested in joining in the public's sympathy for the president's wronged wife and daughter than in exploding it.

Does that mean the door should now be open for tougher coverage—say, a searching *Washington Post* examination of how the White House manages Chelsea coverage to its advantage? Probably. But if that seems harsh, consider that it really poses no danger to Chelsea or anyone else. Precisely because she is such a great kid, it seems unlikely that any serious news organization would take a cheap shot at her personally. There's no controlling the tabloids, of course, but Chelsea of all people should realize that. After all, she's a big girl now.

CHARLES LANE

Will Russia make the transition to democracy?

The elimination of communism in the Soviet Union was expected to bring prosperity and freedom to Russia. The expected transformation of the political and economic landscape has not occurred there however.

Perhaps Russia's problems are not behind her, despite the elimination of communism, because communism, as a variable, did not explain why she experienced economic difficulties in the first place. **Resource availability, rather than communism,** may serve as the variable which better explains Russia's problems.

Poverty, Wealth Dictatorship, Democracy
Resource Scarcity and the Origins of Dictatorship
By Jack Barkstrom
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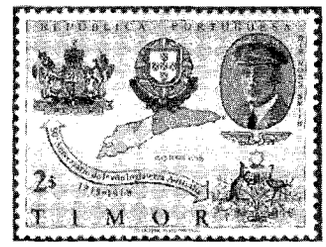
EAST TIMOR DIARIST

Unpacific island

ANY NORMAL GIRL WOULD GO TO Bali. So why was a little voice inside my head urging me to go to East Timor instead? It was simple curiosity—what we hacks like to call "reporter's nose"—that prompted me to stay in my seat for one more stop on the Indonesian airline's flight. So I continued on a few islands, to this former Portuguese colony now under the occupation of the Jakarta regime. I had come to Southeast Asia to escape from the Balkans, which have monopolized my attention for the past three years. East Timor, I reasoned, would be far enough from the Balkans. But it wasn't long before I realized that I was airborne to Kosovo-on-the-Pacific.

IN THE PLANE A MAN CAUGHT MY eye. He wore a black headband with the word "REFERENDUM" scrawled across it and on the back of his colorful jacket a drawing of a gagged *comandante* and words in Portuguese that read: "YOU SILENCED MY RIGHTS, THE RIGHTS OF YOUR LAWS." When we landed in Dili, East Timor's capital, the airport was packed with what seemed to be "*tout* Dili." I poked my nose around and learned that the crowd was a welcoming party for that man on our flight, Jacintu Alvis, who was returning home after ten years in an Indonesian prison. He was one of 42 political prisoners (26 of them East Timorese) released that day as part of an amnesty granted by Indonesian President B.J. Habibie, the man who succeeded Suharto after last May's student demonstrations. As those in the crowd hugged Alvis and wept, I looked around the hall, half-expecting to spy a banner reading: "ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE!" This was no Bali. But it took me a while to switch gears from being a Kosovo war correspondent to an almost-Bali vacationer. My guide in East Timor was Lansell, an Australian water engineer. We drove outside Dili so that I could get a feel for the place, and, as we passed military posts, an all too familiar sight, Lansell would say proudly, "And there, you see, is our tank." I scanned the terrain for tracks and a barrel but found only pipes and faucets.

DILI DEFINITELY QUALIFIES AS A sister city to Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. The similarities between the two provinces are striking. Both boast a mixed population of Christians and Muslims, each speaking a different language. Both are ruled by a governor beholden to a faraway metropolis (Jakarta or Belgrade) which imposes the metropolis's language, currency, and police on the local population. In both cities, local politicians of the oppressed peoples quarrel among themselves, and the separatists among them have taken up arms. And, in both provinces, the civilians are caught in the middle. But the similarities don't end there. A proposed autonomy plan for East Timor skirted the issue of a referendum on independence by holding out the promise of a "review" after five or ten years. Christopher Hill, the American mediator for Kosovo, is almost certain to present an identical plan in Rambouillet.



IN THE CASE OF EAST Timor, though, this "autonomy-later" offer now may be off the table, replaced by something far more enticing. Last month, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, referring to East Timor, declared: "If they want their freedom, they are welcome." Well, perhaps. But any independence will have to be granted by Indonesia's government, and, after the country's June 7 elections, Indonesia may have a new government—one less receptive to East Timorese independence. In the meantime, however, the most famous East Timorese political prisoner, Xanana Gusmao, has been moved from the Cipinang Prison in Jakarta to more accommodating house arrest.

I SUSPECT MY FRIENDS IN KOSOVO will be jealous of these developments, but there is nothing about East Timor to envy. Indonesia's occupation of East Timor began in December 1975, when it invaded the half-island. (West Timor is not disputed; it was a Dutch colony that fell into Indonesia's possession after World War II.) Jakarta claimed that it intervened to stop a civil war that had broken out after Portugal, which was shedding its colonies in response to its 1974 "Carnation Revolution," hastily withdrew from East Timor. But, with Jakarta vowing to "not allow another Cuba here," and with the April 1975 fall of Saigon fresh in everyone's minds, the geopolitical reasons for this invasion were transparent. So was its brutality: 200,000 East Timorese, about one in every three people on the half-island, were killed or starved to death as a result of the invasion.

THE UNOFFICIAL HUMAN RIGHTS monitoring task in East Timor is carried out by the Catholic Church. Just like the Jesuits I met in San Salvador 15 years ago, the priests and nuns I encountered in East Timor showed me photos of mutilated bodies and gave me copies of testimonies to take out of the country. They also provided me with a valuable perspective. A Portuguese priest, who has lived in East Timor since 1971 and who witnessed the 1975 massacres ("committed in the name of anti-communism," he says), traced Suharto's downfall to the November 1991 shootings in Dili's Santa Cruz cemetery. More than 100 people died in the cemetery massacre, but it wasn't the death toll, the priest explained, that made the event particularly significant. More important was the fact that this one atrocity has been filmed by an Australian TV crew. Now the world was aware of East Timor's plight, and in 1996 two East Timorese—the exiled diplomat Jose Ramos-Horta and the Dili-based Bishop Carlos Ximenez Belo—were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Not even the media-savvy John Paul II, who visited the half-island in 1989, could compete with television.

BISHOP BELO, WHO IS USUALLY hostile to the media, was exceptionally charming when I dropped by to see him. (It helps to be a compatriot of the Holy Father!) He was extremely worried about the situation in East Timor. Passions were running very high, he cautioned, and he expected ethnic conflicts. Moreover, he didn't like the idea of Indonesia unilaterally granting East Timor independence. Any independence, the bishop thought, should be gradual and come only as a result of a U.N.-monitored referendum because "it is crucial that people here have a say about their fate." An editorial in the January 29 *Jakarta Post* pointed out that, rather than agree to a referendum, Indonesia might just withdraw from East Timor. This way, the *Post* reasoned, Indonesia "would be severing ties with East Timor, not the other way around.' But the other way around, apparently, is what the East Timorese want. In Pristina, the Kosovo Albanians have already had their referendum, so they chant "independence." But, in Dili, the bandannas around the heads of the pro-independence demonstrators carry the slogan "REFERENDUM." They don't seem to trust Indonesia too much, and I don't blame them.

ANNA HUSARSKA

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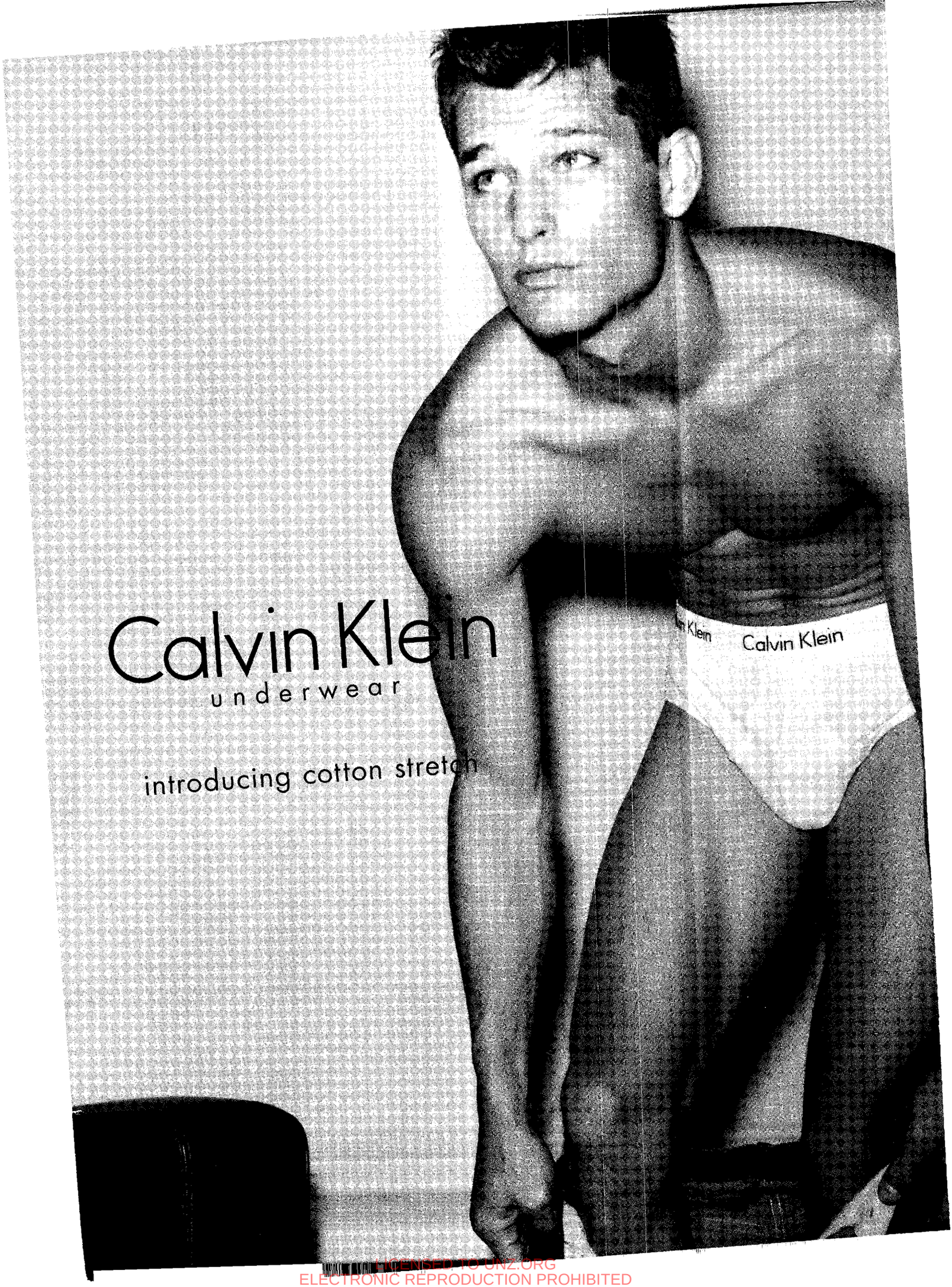

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